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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

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Editorial

...Joanne Anderton

This is not my first ride with *Andromeda Spaceways*, although it's certainly been the longest. At first I only took small trips, just blips on the radar, long enough to pick up a mag with a jump-out-at-you cover and flick through its pages. Inevitably, the trips lengthened, they became buy-the-mag-and-read-all-the-stories length, then read the non-fiction, then the reviews. Finally, the read-it-all-again return trip.

So, given this was my first time in the cabin I was going to write about something important in this editorial. It was going to be *significant*, maybe even *controversial*. I envisioned a piece to provoke argument, to get people thinking, maybe even to change someone's opinion about the world. Well, I was going to try.

Then I realised just how serious that all sounded and I wondered, is that really why we're on board? Because I know it's not why I'm here.

I'm here to read great stories. And then the non-fiction, and the reviews.

How's that for deep and meaningful?

I don't read Speculative Fiction because I want insights into the human condition, or biting social commentary, or self-referential analysis of the genre. And I'm certainly not saying Speculative Fiction can't do these things and more, or doesn't do these things, or can't do them well. All I'm saying is that's not why I read it. They are the whipped cream in my pavlova, but we all know we really eat pav for the meringue.

I read Speculative Fiction for the crunchy, sugary mould, for the distance it can take you, even when your trip is just a blip on the radar. I read it for the adventure of being lost in another world, or a future world, for meeting characters with amazing powers, for the humour and the unparalleled sense of 'other'. Sounds simple, and so much the better.

With that in mind, I invite you to feast on the stories in this issue, the meringue or the whipped cream, whichever you prefer. There's plenty of adventure in other worlds and future places. Some of the stories are darkly humorous, some make me laugh out loud every time I read them. And there's even one or two that are quiet and touching.

So sit back and enjoy the flight. Don't mind that little red flashing button close to your elbow, everything's under control. And no matter how long you're here for, be it blip-length or the next in a long series of return flights, here's hoping you enjoy the food.

Joanne Anderton
Editor, Issue 34

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The Flying Woman

...R J Astruc

The Council says it's the pipes.

Something to do with the earth settling, they say. Something to do with the earth settling and the metal rusting and the winter coming and the globe warming and the glacial shifting of tectonic plates deep beneath the concrete foundations of Wickley Street West. Something to do, no doubt, with the fact that our tenements haven't seen a qualified plumber since Latysha DuBois from flat 21C quit her affair with the bald guy from *Mario's Toilet Specialists*. Or it could be something to do with BZM Tricky's failed attempt to dispose of two litres of illegal chemicals down the loo of 6D last Tuesday. But whatever the cause, the root of the problem is the pipes, so the Council says, and that's their final word on the matter. Just the pipes.

Which is absolute bollocks, of course, because no pipe on this earth could possibly emit a scream so spine-chillingly human, no matter how bloody rusty it is.

I've heard some screams in my lifetime — a lifetime, by the way, that stretches all the way from twenty-first century West London to the *long long ago* of Zoroaster's New Persia. I've heard the howls of foolhardy Spartans slain in their hundreds by Xerxes's militia; I've heard the bestial braying of the wild demon-deevs who live deep in the mountains of Mazandaran; and I've heard little Susie Soo from 9B let out some truly horrific squeals when her mum won't let her watch the Tellytubbies. I can tell you from all those years of experience, and without a moment's hesitation, that the Wickley Street West screams are infinitely *worse*. We're talking about the kind of noise you'd get if Fay Wray strangled a cat whilst simultaneously dragging her fingernails down a blackboard.

The other tenants of Wickley Street West think I'm losing my mind — or *goin' flippen mental*, in our common chav patois. Anita Singh, the pretty Indian lady from 19B, suggests I'm having some kind of bachelor-specific breakdown. "What you need is a wife, Zeem," she tells me when I drop by with her Hindi newspaper. "Find yourself a Mrs al-Djinn who will take your mind off this screaming nonsense. You may just be a Tesco's till-jockey, but there are many women out there who do not mind men without prospects or money. Just the other week I was talking to a lovely Middle Eastern lady in the supermarket who has a daughter of marriageable age with very low self esteem—"

"The screaming, Annie!" I splutter. "Don't you hear it?"

“Not anymore. Raj finally connected our new subwoofers to the telly,” Anita says, beaming. “Did I tell you it is a plasma? Picture so clear you can see every single pimple on the faces of those pretty Neighbours boys. Raj bought it from ebay of course, because of the bargains...”

Chu Hong, the foreign exchange student from 24D, is similarly blasé about the screaming. “It is distracting me from my studies, yes,” she agrees, glaring at me over her biology textbook, “but no more so than the fights, the loud music, Latyshia DuBois having sex, the dogs barking and certain people who drop by unannounced to ask me about the noise.”

Later that evening, when I check in on BZM Tricky, ringleader of the Wickley Street West hood, he claims he hasn’t heard the screams at all over the sound of his Playstation. Not that it’d really matter if he heard them or not. “Screams?” he smirks, fingers twitching over the buttons of a ridiculous plastic guitar that’s somehow connected to the bright spots appearing on his telly. “This is bleedin’ Wickley, Zeem, who the hell cares?”

I’ll be the first to admit it: we tenement-dwellers aren’t what you’d call a well-adjusted bunch. But like those jolly folk on Coronation Street, we’ve always survived through the virtue of community — we take care of our own. In times of trouble, people usually turn to me. Don’t misunderstand me — it’s not a matter of faith. They all have their own gods, of course: Jehovah, Krishna, Allah, the Goddess, Buddha, you name it, this is multi-bloody-cultural Britain after all — but I’m *closer*, see, and I’m accessible in the way gods and supernatural types usually aren’t. My door — the door of flat 12B — is always open, and when they talk to me, I have the good manners to talk back.

So it hurts that when *I* want help, no one seems to care.

The only other person in the tenements who finds the screaming disturbing is Mack Barden from 26B. “Never heard anything like it,” he marvels, as I dutifully help him carry his shopping up to his flat. “Damn Council knows nothing, never does. I reckon one of those gang-banger boys on the third floor have got someone hostage in their room. You listen closely, Zeem, and you’d swear it was a woman crying.”

Mack is a true Wickley Street West irregular, a geriatric ex-pat who lost his Merkin accent in transit somewhere between Philadelphia and Piccadilly. Normally unflappable, I’m surprised that the screams have managed to get under his skin too. “I’d be out of here if it weren’t for the wife,” he confides. “Woman’s still in bed after her last turn. Lucky she isn’t bothered by all the noise — deep sleeper, is my Mary.”

I sigh. “She’d have to be.”

By the time the second week is up, I’ve just about had it. I’m even considering moving into a Finchley-side flat with a co-worker from Tesco’s, or renting a room in one of those grimy backpacker hostels in Camden. I’m a divine creature of beauty and music; having to listen to screams twenty four hours a day is literal torture. And unlike everyone else, I don’t have a Playstation or subwoofers to drown it out.

I’m throwing t-shirts into doubled plastic bags — the closest thing I have on hand to an actual suitcase — when my flat-neighbour Johnny Flannery breaks into my house to give me a chocolate cake.

“Johnny?”

“Zeeeeeem,” says Johnny, the grin on his face wide enough to bridge the Thames. The cake sits in one hand; from the other hangs a bushel of bent wires and spikes, his lock-picking tools of the trade. Our Johnny’s what you’d call a ne’er-do-well, but he’s a particularly charming, considerate and good-looking ne’er-do-well, which elevates his social standing from mindless thug to local god. A few inches shy of seven feet tall, he’s all hard brown muscle and ripped denim, with eyes as sharp as a magpie with binoculars — the guy can spot an unlocked window or an unwatched purse from a distance of a hundred metres in low-visibility conditions.

He kicks the door closed behind him and meanders in, his stride the easy swagger that’s become his trademark in these parts. “Long time no see, eh?”

As a matter of fact it’s been a very long time and no see. For the past eight weeks Johnny Flannery has been peeling spuds in Her Majesty’s, after being caught doing what he refers to as *a little harmless thievin’ and nickin’*. This isn’t the first time our Johnny’s been caught *thievin’* or *nickin’*, nor is it the first time he’s been in jail, nor is it even the first time he’s broken into my house to tell me about it, so I can’t understand why he sees the need to commemorate the event with cake.

“What’s this?”

“Cake,” says Johnny, sucking cream off his fingers. “Chocolate cake. I got it special from the bakers in Finchley. Can’t hardly tell the icing rubbed off some in me bag.”

“You know I don’t eat.”

Johnny pulls a face. “It ain’t for eating,” he explains, in a patient tone I’ve heard him use to placate cynical juries. “It’s an offerin’, a present, right? Me granny told me I should always bring the little people cake if I’m to ask them to grant a boon. That way they’re more likely to grant it, see?”

Of all the people in Wickley, Johnny is the only one who knows of my supernatural background — let’s just say that granny of his is a little too canny for her own good. Problem is, the word *fairy* in New Persia suggests a significantly different thing in western folklore (not to mention what it suggests in modern London). Western folklore usually defines a fairy as a perky little creature who dances about in stockings and big shoes with curled toes and probably has a name like *Whifflebottom* or *Fluffscamper*. But in New Persia we *peri* are — were — fallen angels, which makes us rather more hardcore than your average Whifflebottom. Sure, we’re pretty and musical and like flowers, but we don’t play tricks, we don’t dress like Santa’s elves and you’re more likely to catch us wielding a sword than a magic wand.

“Johnny,” I say, shaking out the last of my t-shirts to be packed, “I’m not *little people*, I don’t live under a toadstool and if you want to curry my favour, hire me a stripper.”

“Wish I could, Zeem, but me girlfriend wouldn’t let me. Says I’m not allowed to speak to ladies of the night. Look mate, I got nothin’ else to give and I got no one else to tell, no one who ain’t gonna look at me like I’m some kinda crazy.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m seein’ a flying woman.”

“A flying woman,” I echo. I sense that this is either a joke at my expense or a beer-induced fantasy. If it were anyone else at my doorstep I’d send them packing with a choice word or two about wasting my time — except I’m terribly fond of Johnny,

who's the closest I have to a real friend, if being a real friend means that you're obligated to cough up bail money every other month and lie to their parole officer. "Fancy that. And where exactly is this flying woman of yours?"

Johnny isn't easily dissuaded. "Right outside, Zeem. What, don't you hear her screamin'?"

I stop short.

"Screaming, you say?"

A few minutes later we're outside the tenements, standing on the small brown patch of lawn that suffices for a communal garden. Johnny looks up, raising a hand to his face, squinting against what little sunlight has managed to batter its way through the thick grey clouds overhead. This is interesting in and of itself, because the overcast sky is a localised phenomenon — just on the other side of Wickley Street, in fact, the sun is bright, the sky cloudless. The whole thing is *ominous* in a cheesy B-movie way, which somehow makes it more unnerving.

"Look up and to the right, yeah? There's an old lady up there, hanging around 'bout the third floor, hollerin' her guts out. Can't see too clearly, but I think she's brushin' — combin' — her hair. Don't know how the old bird got up there, mind, what with the rheumatisms they all get at that age..." He looks to me for support. "You do see her, don't you?"

I stand in the shadow of Johnny's near-seven foot frame and try to follow his line of sight. But there's nothing there. "No," I admit.

"Zeem, mate, she's *right there*—"

"But I can't see her."

Johnny furrows his brow. "You reckon I'm crazy?"

I don't think Johnny's crazy. Unrepentant kleptomaniac he might be, but crazy, no. He's certainly right about one thing: the screams do seem to be emanating from that place. And while I can't see anything, I can smell something. The odour isn't strong but it's definitely there — a damp, rotten smell, like old clothing, like mouldering paper, like the abandoned shed in Tesco's carpark where we till-jockeys meet on our smoke-breaks. And I sense, too, a strange electricity loose in the air, a chilly breeze too penetrating for this British summer, and atmospheric sparks of something that must be, that can only be, *magic*.

A flying woman who screams and combs her hair and can only be seen by Johnny Flannery of 12A. There's only one supernatural nuisance I can think of fits this profile. *Bean sidhe*. Or, in the common parlance, banshee.

"Johnny?" I say, turning back to him. "Your granny's Irish, isn't she?"

I read Darwin a few years ago.

Not *The Origin of Species* but the precocious prequel, *Letters to my Emma*, an informal collection of the correspondence between Darwin and his future wife and cousin, Emma Hedgewood. Don't bother trying your library — they won't have heard of it. The book never reached a traditional publisher, and instead languished for over a century at the bottom of the future Mrs Darwin's glory box until an auction brought

it to light in the early 1950s. From there the manuscript passed through several sweaty hands, eventually making its way onto the supernatural black-market in the sixties, where it was reproduced and sold within our circles as a cult classic.

Letters to My Emma is the *real* monkey trial, you see, in which old Charlie does his absolute best to combine Emma's Catholic catechetics with the theory of evolution — and therefore secure her hand in marriage. Although he eventually wins the argument, it's clear that his victory has less to do with the clarity of his stance and more to do with Emma's growing affection for him. Certainly, Charlie gets some facts right, but in his letters he makes two critical mistakes: the first being that religion is set in stone and the second being that immortals have to give a damn about evolution.

And really, why should we? After all, we don't have to do it ourselves. Our apathy even extends to the world's social evolution. You won't see medieval British ghouls dressing up in Adidas sweatpants or getting jiggy with it. You won't catch the monkey-general Hanuman offering tactical advice on India's nuclear weapons policy. You won't find goggle-eyed Chinese dragons haggling for bargains at the local Asian supermarket. In fact your average immortal wanders about as if it's still 1852, or 526, or 725 BCE.

"We don't change, Johnny, you see what I'm saying?"

"You say that, Zeem, but I still see you workin' the till at Tesco's."

"The exception that proves the rule. I'm from an entirely different era and an entirely different country. My kind has always lived closely with humans. Back in Persia, we used to work and fight alongside humans — even marry them now and then. On the other hand, the most interaction banshees ever had with humans was to turn up once every seventy years and scream portentously at them for a few minutes. Nowadays it'd be more polite, more *convenient*, if they screamed portentously over the phone or wrote portentous emails. But no, this one is obviously sticking to the old banshee MO."

By this stage of the afternoon we're sitting by the fireside of the only pub on The King's Passage, the cobbled alleyway that branches off from Wickley Street. The pub's name, incidentally, is The Queen's Finger, which is what passes for high humour in Wickley. I'm not a fan of pubs myself — even the cheapest wines aren't harsh enough to satisfy my tastes — but at least the banshee's piercing ululations can't reach us through the thick stone walls of the Finger.

Well, that's Johnny's official reasoning for the visit, but I've a hunch that the reality is Johnny just *needs* a pint, in much the same way a bloke in hell just *needs* a glass of water. Frankly I don't blame him. If eight weeks in Wandsworth clink fails to send a man to drink, a close encounter of the ghoulish Celtic kind surely will.

"I ain't allowed an email address since me woman caught me signing up to enlarge me willy, and I ain't paid the phone bill in years." Johnny takes a long draught of his beer, then belches explosively into his hand. "Zeem, man, I don't want to die any time soon. Me granny always said that if'n you hear one of 'em banshees you only got a day to live. Mebbe less."

"It can't be screaming after you. You haven't even been here for the past two months." Gently I ease his hand off his pint and slide a coaster beneath the glass. "I expect that the first banshees appeared to farmers living out in the middle of

nowhere. There'd be no one around to hear or see them except the soon-to-be-dead. It's a different story now that the Irish have migrated to places with Council tenements and a population density of five people per ten square feet. Trust me, Johnny, *everyone* can hear the banshee. Unless Kim Jong-il has decided that the greatest threat to his rulership is a bunch of dippy chavs from outer-West London, or the US government has received intelligence that Tricky is hiding weapons of mass destruction in his closet, I don't think we all have much to worry about."

Johnny frowns. "But only I can see her."

"You're Irish. Well, *partly* Irish, but I don't think all the Nigerians and South Africans and Slovaks your ancestors knocked up in the last century make much difference if you're still a direct blood descendant of one of the old ruling clans of Erin."

The fire crackles and pops in the hearth as Johnny Flannery runs a finger thoughtfully around the rim of his glass. "You're forgettin' somethin' there, Zeem."

"What's that then?"

"She's got to be screamin' about someone."

"Surely not for two weeks straight?" I may not be an expert in Celtic mythology — the wealth of my knowledge comes from watching a badly synched VHS of *The Leprechaun* a decade ago — but I'm fairly sure that banshees don't hang around any longer than Latysha DuBois' revolving-door boyfriends. In my mind I've got this picture of a banshee caught in some kind of time-loop, its scream hopping and repeating like a broken record.

"Why not?" Johnny knocks back the last dregs of his drink. "Mebbe she's screaming about someone who's takin' a hell of a long time to die."

"Oh come on. Someone who's not only taking a long time to die, but who's also blind *and* deaf? If anyone else saw a flying screaming woman hanging outside their window, I suspect my door would be the first they'd knock on. Really, Johnny, they'd have to be out cold if they — ohhh."

That moment, that *ohhh*, that's the point where I get it.

There's a bit in *Letters to my Emma*, right at the beginning, where young Charlie naively suggests that science and religion can exist comfortably alongside each other. Which I'm sure they can; the problems only start when they attempt to interact. Charlie's right on one front — science doesn't invalidate religion — but it sure confuses the hell out of it.

"What do you damn kids wan— oh, it's you, Zeem."

"Yes, sir. I need help."

"And you aren't the only one, looks like." Mack Barden peers up at Johnny — peers up *and* up, really — and makes a low tutting beneath his breath. "Thought you were meant to be doing time, Flannery. I suppose Her Majesty's locks were no match for your skills, eh."

"Got out on good behaviour," says Johnny cheerfully. "I'm a bleedin' role model, me."

“Sir, can we come in? I’ll see to it that Johnny keeps his hands to himself.”

“My wife is in no fit state—”

“Actually, sir, that’s why we’re here.”

Reluctantly he unfastens the catch and lets us in.

It’s a small apartment, smaller than our second-floor bachelor pads, or perhaps it only seems that way because of the clutter of old-people trinkets that line every available surface: tiny china dogs, teapots, plates, sepia-hued photos in wide gold frames. The greying wallpaper is covered with a motif of fleur-de-lis. Close by, the banshee screams. Johnny catches my eye and I nod. At this range it’s impossible to imagine those sobs and howls as anything other than a woman weeping.

Mrs Barden lies on a low bed in the living room. If it weren’t for the tubes in her arms and nose you could mistake her sleep as natural. A tired housewife getting in a quick nap before her husband arrives home from work. Her hands lie palms up at her sides, the wrists buckled forward. Her nails are painted a vivid red. I remember her as a loud, boisterous woman, always rushing somewhere — to church, to the shops, to dinner with friends. I remember liking her smile.

I always forget that having *a turn* in England can mean anything from catching a tummy bug to suffering a stroke. Except someone with a tummy bug would be unlikely to sleep through a banshee’s screams.

“I don’t have to feed her,” says Mack. “There are tubes for that. The hospital was very kind after the...after her turn. We have a carer who comes in three times a week.”

“She was an O’-something before she married, wasn’t she?” I say. “Descendant of one of the old Irish clans. An O’Connor or an O’Neill or an O’Toole.”

“O’Neill. She used to be Mary O’Neill.”

Although the curtain is drawn and the lights restfully dim, I can see that Mrs Barden’s bed is positioned directly beneath a large, east-facing window.

“She isn’t really in there, you know,” Mack says. There’s a confused expression on his face, as if the sound of his own words, his own private prognosis, are a little shocking to him. “The hospital said that she might pull through, pull *out* of this, but I know it’s over now. I’m just waiting for...for the *time*.”

“She’s on life-support, like?” Johnny asks.

“The machine breathes for her.”

Of course it does. And of course the banshee doesn’t understand. Because banshees don’t care about science. Banshees don’t know anything about life support systems or brain death or comas. They’re not modern-world compatible. They don’t understand how humans can evade death for weeks or months or even years with their vitals plugged into machines. Banshees are old-school: they come from a time when dying meant you actually ended up *dead*.

“I know it’s over,” Mack repeats, sliding heavily into an armchair opposite his prone wife. “But what do I do? She’s my wife, my Mary, but I can’t do it — can’t hardly even *think*,” he adds with a snarl, “with the sound of those damnable pipes...”

“We could help,” I suggest.

“No — no. My Mary was a good Catholic lady. I don’t want her die in the hands of no Muslim or hood — no offence or anything, but you know how it is.”

Actually New Persia and Zoroasterism predate Islam (and, hell, Catholicism) by several centuries, and Johnny considers himself less of a hood and more of a freelance locksmith, but I don't want to seem picky. Poor man is going through a rough enough time without getting an ear-bashing on cultural sensitivity.

"I meant that we could help you afterwards," I say, reaching for his hand — but already I know it's useless, can sense it in the stiff line of Mack's shoulders. He's not a man who believes in the precepts of *dying gracefully*; he is a hanger-on, a clinger-to of life and perhaps, though he won't admit it, hope. "I'm so very sorry," is all I can think of to say, small, weak words, and Mack doesn't look at me.

I withdraw to the window to consult with Johnny.

"Do somethin'," Johnny urges.

"Do something? Do what?"

"Well if Mack won't help, you could always have a word with Miss You Know Who," he suggests, giving the window a meaningful look.

"Me? Why don't you, Johnny?" I hiss, and drag back the curtain in one swift move, leaving the rollers shuddering within the rail. "You're the only one who can see her, and chances are you'll be the only one who can communicate with her, too. You were auditioning earlier for the position of Human Ambassador for Fairy Relations — why not try your chocolate cake shtick on this one? After all, our misery chick here is a *sidhe*, a supernatural subspecies known to be far more obliging toward present-givers than your average Persian *peri*."

Together Johnny and I stare out the window. I can't see the banshee. But I can tell from the change in Johnny's expression that she is there. He has what you'd call an empathic face: the miseries of others reflect easily in it. So I can see our suburban *bean sidhe* through his eyes, her cheeks glistening with tears, her sharp features framed by ribbons of white hair.

Johnny's forehead furrows. "Should I get the cake, then?"

"Johnny—"

But he's already opening the window and leaning out. I wonder what the banshee will make of Johnny Flannery, a man with the blood of a Dubliner but the accent of a London dockster, and the smooth, coffee-coloured skin you only get from a thoroughly multicultural wade in the global gene pool. Gripping the sill with both hands, Johnny coughs politely in a way that makes me think immediately of a young Charlie Darwin preparing to explain the nature of natural selection to pretty Miss Hedgewood.

"Lady?" he says. "Lady?"

The screaming tails off to a low howl and is replaced by a series of snuffles. Something like the sound Xerxes made after his troops were forced snivelling back from Salamis — or, if you prefer, the sound that little Susie Soo makes when she's forced to eat her greens.

"Lady," says Johnny, "she's gone. Passed away long ago. Only reason she's still breathing is the fact they got a machine now what does it for her. It's all wires, lady. You don't believe me, you look at Mr Barden's face."

And he steps aside as Mack looks up from his armchair slump, dead-eyed and miserable. It's a funny thing, but you can't mistake grief for loss, not if you stare it in its pale and punctured face over the near-corpse of its wife. Mack *emits*, on the most

primitive and human level, all those things that Johnny — and Charles before him — could never express in words.

“You see that,” says Johnny to the banshee. “You see that, don’t you?”

She does.

Seconds later the sniffles stop, the clouds part, and the Wickley Street West banshee is gone, vanished back to whatever world of ancient Celtic mythology she came from. Leaving behind her a wake of beautiful, wonderful, fantastic, incredible, amazing, marvellous, miraculous in that oh-my-gods-I-can’t-believe-it’s-real way... silence. That’s right: for the first time in almost two weeks, silence descends over Wickley’s most infamous tenements.

Still hanging out the window, one hand curled around the sill, Johnny waves. Turning back he says, “I guess it’s over.”

Although it isn’t, not quite. In fact it isn’t *really* over until two days later, when Mrs Mary Barden (nee O’Neill) dies in her bed, her loving husband holding one hand, a certain Persian till-jockey holding the other. Because despite Mack’s suspicions about my Middle Eastern origins, he still understands that I am an angel, and that an angel’s place — whatever their faith, whatever their location, and hell, whatever Charlie Darwin has to say on the subject — is by the side of humankind.

It’s a horrible thing to watch a husband lose his wife a second time. There are tears, and there are screams, and there are howls, there are recriminations and apologies and final promises of pure, hapless love. And after it’s all over — *really* over — I return to my flat, where my melancholy is tempered somewhat when I find Johnny Flannery of 12A in the process of stealing back my chocolate cake.

“Me old lady came home with *women’s problems*, if’n you know what I mean,” he explains, “and I got to get her off me back somehow, and I figured that well, you don’t *eat*, right, you ain’t using it for nothing, and there’s nothing a woman on her monthlies likes better than a big ol’ chocolate cake...”

I sigh. With a little persistence, it seems that Celtic fairies can change their century-old habits, but when it comes to your average Wickley resident? Not a bleeding chance.

“Just take it, Johnny,” I say, closing the door.

Drinking from the Saucer

...Nigel Stones

Blackfella, whitefella — makes little difference to me. Makes no difference to them what's in charge. Sheilas though, that's a whole other story. Ain't seen any of them since the aliens took me an' I'm guessin' that's years back now.

You list'nin' to me?

Poor bastard. Bet you believed all that stuff about weather balloons and ball lightnin'.

Hauled you from your bed too, I bet, like some fat carp skull-dragged outta the dam. Right now you prob'ly all wide-eyed an' worried what'll happen to you. Well you need ta listen. Listen real good 'cos what I gotta tell you might be the only thing to keep you alive.

There's two reasons they could be playin' this to you. First is they picked you to replace me. Just lucky you got me to tell you it all an' not have them push it into your head. When they done me, it near killed me.

I never seen the aliens. They can't stand to look at us. We makes their guts turn. They told me that — pushed the thought so hard into me head I thought the pain was gonna kill me. That's why they need the likes of you an' me to do their work.

I better start with your instructions before they give me a helpin' of pain just for takin' too long.

The doors, then — look around an' you'll see them: purple, red, green, blue, yellow, orange. See how each has got a button? When they're lit, you can press them an' the door opens.

The purple door is to your room. The tube stickin' out of the wall in there is for food. The food looks like clear porridge an' tastes like snot, but you'll get used to it. The hole in the floor is the dunny. You best sit on it an' not try to aim, cos if you get any round the edge or on the floor, the aliens'll give you a dose of head-splittin'-in-two an' you don't want that.

Through the yellow door is the shower. If you do end up missin' the hole an' shittin' on the floor then you'll need a mouthful of water from there to clean it up an' stop the pain. Mostly you'll be needin' the shower though to wash the bodies. You get the bodies from the room with the red door. Make sure you wash 'em good.

Like I said, the bodies are in the red room. They'll be naked an' out cold. Just drag them to the shower an' clean them up.

The hard job is through the blue door an' the green one. This is where the racks an' trays are. You need to drag the clean bodies onto the trays an' then lift them up onto the racks. I've had to shift some heavy bastards in me time here, but the job's gotta be done. Once you fill the racks you need to leave the room quick-smart or the pain'll start. The door locks behind you an' after a while, when the button lights back up, the trays'll be empty.

I'll tell you what happens to the bodies; save you the pain of them tellin' you the way they told me. The aliens make tea out of them. Yep, tea. They feed them into a mincer, dry what comes out an' then make a powder of it. Poor sods don't feel it though, so I guess that's somethin'. That's why you have to wash the bodies: so there's no dirt or deodorant or aftershave or nuthin' to muck up the taste. That's why the aliens don't take sheilas: just don't taste right.

The aliens make two kinds of tea. The expensive kind they make in the room behind the green door. You see, when a man gets scared, there's all these chemicals that his body makes. The aliens, they like the taste of that. Fetches a good price.

That's why the bodies you put into the green room have to go to the orange room first. You put them in there for a spell an' it wakes them up. They still can't move nuthin' below their neck, mind. The aliens don't want them jumpin' around while they feed their feet into the mincer. They want them helpless; knowin' what's comin'; feelin' the pain; frightened.

I said at the start there was two reasons you might be listenin' to this. If you are lyin' naked on the floor in a room with an orange door and you can't move, you can scream now.

Blood Debt

...M P Ericson

Rain pattered around us, tapped on the leaves of trees and settled in the rich brown earth that lay uncovered by our feet.

Deep enough, the grave was. The diggers threw their spades over the edge to land with a thud on the wet soil, and helped each other out of the trench.

Deep enough. Father would lie undisturbed for many long years to come.

I looked at him. He seemed calm, untroubled that death had overtaken him after chasing him for so long.

He lay on the bier, still in his fighting clothes. Blood drenched his rough linen trews and worn leather jerkin. The gash in his chest clotted dark with it. His shirt-sleeves were soaked, too, but the fabric at his right shoulder remained clean. I could see the line of my own neat mending across it, like an old scar, and I knew there was a scar underneath to match.

One of a hundred injuries to leave their mark on him. The last would never heal.

I wished he had worn ringmail. For years I begged him to wear it. He only laughed, and said the day he put one of those jingling jackets on was the day he would give up fighting and take to clownery instead. I wished he had. Anything but lie dead before me now.

Ardwyad touched my arm. I nodded without looking up. I wanted to see only Father, in these last few moments before the earth cloaked him from my sight.

The diggers lifted him carefully off the bier, lowered him into the grave with ropes slung under his body, and drew the coils out again.

There was a moment of silence. Even the rain eased, as if earth and sky both knew that Father was dead and the world would never be the same.

"A good man," Ardwyad said.

It broke the spell. The diggers picked up their spades, and covered Father's still form with only a few strokes. They knew their work. Perhaps they had performed this task for a hundred men or more.

Some of those had fallen to Father's sword.

All comers. That was how he made a living. Bets taken, all comers, terms by arrangement: first touch, first blood, to the death.

I watched him often. Mother never let me, but after she died the fighting-pits became my home. I made money at the cock-fights, both matching and betting,

and learned to give as I got with the men who thought it amusing to find a young girl at the fights.

Father kept an eye on me. So did his friends, especially Mael, the overseer. Mael and Father had travelled together for years, back when they both made their living as adventurers, before they settled down and got married.

Ceri, Mael's wife, treated me like a daughter. Perhaps I should have been more grateful, but I never cared much for her well-swept house. I wanted to be with Father, and Father was at the pits from dawn until dusk.

He trained me during quiet hours, and that was how I came to learn swordfighting. Of late I made some money that way, too. First touch only, Father insisted, and called me his treasure trove, and said he would not let any man take me from him. He even told Ardwyad that.

"Over my dead body," he said, with a look in his eyes that I knew, the one that meant he was not to be moved.

Ardwyad told him not to call for trouble.

I had a terrible sense that Ardwyad would ask me, now when I had to say no. Because there was something else I had to do, before I could think of marrying. A task that must come before everything else, and would likely cost me my life.

Blood debt, Father called it. He took on men in the pits over that, men whose fathers or brothers or sons he had killed. They wanted revenge but got death instead. As I would. The fighter who bested Father would dispatch me without blinking. Still I had to do it. I had to find her and kill her, without thought of anything else.

"Where's she staying?"

Ardwyad turned to look at me, his mailcoat rattling as he moved.

"You're not going near her." I knew that tone as well as I knew Father's look: the 'don't mess with a King's man' voice. "She'll kill you before you draw. She's good — I've dealt with her before. It was a fair fight, Drysi. Your father knew the risks and accepted them. The last thing he'd want you to do is throw your own life away trying to avenge him."

That was true. Ardwyad knew Father. They understood each other well, far better than you might have thought from the way they spoke to each other.

Oh, the things they used to say. Father called Ardwyad an unblooded pup, and a rich men's errand-boy, and a pathetic excuse for a fighter. Ardwyad, undaunted, called Father an old-timer, a has-been, a nobody, and a poor excuse for a man.

I would snap that they were indistinguishable, which earned me either a cuff over the head or an affectionate hug, depending on what mood they happened to be in at the time.

"It's quicker if you tell me," I said, "but I'll find her whether you do or not."

He gave me an unloving look from shadowy hazel eyes.

"The Wheatsheaf. You're not going there."

The diggers smoothed the sides of the mound, and firmed the earth around the marker stone. Hundreds of other footstones watched me in silence. Some of the graves held drinking-bowls of tarnished silver, for the monthly offerings some families made to departed ancestors.

"None of that, my girl," Father would say as we watched them walk past the pits: a procession of dour figures, black-clad and sombre, keeping an unbroken silence. "Don't give me one of those pissing-bowls, and don't waste time whining at my grave. Do you hear me?"

I laughed, and promised.

"Black's no colour for a pretty woman," he added if one came past us. "Wear something cheerful, and toast me on my way to the Hall of Warriors. Remember your father was never one for moping." Then he hugged me, and said some people seemed to love death better than life, but I was not one of them.

Mother's grave lay nearby, sheltered by a great oak. We went there together often, and Father always told a story of how one of us had done something or said something that made her laugh. I remembered, or at least I seemed to remember, until every memory I had of Mother was one of her laughing.

Father held my promise. I would not weep, nor wear black, and his grave would be marked by nothing but a simple stone. I would go to the Wheatsheaf and buy myself a beer, and toast him on his way.

Then I would join him.

"Thank you," I told Ardwyad. "For everything."

He had stormed down from the barracks as soon as he heard the news, and he and Mael between them settled the funeral. There was nothing for me to do except tell them what Father wanted, eat the hot soup that Ceri brought over for me, and let myself be persuaded to go to bed. It did not seem possible that I should sleep, but I did, deeply and dreamlessly, while Mael and Ceri sat in the kitchen with Father, and Ardwyad sat on the floor beside my bed, watching out the night.

He smiled now, a little wearily, and put his arm around me as I turned to face the others.

Men, all of them: fighters and trainers, swordsmiths and innkeepers. Father had many friends in the town.

I greeted each of them in turn and thanked them for coming. Serious voices greeted me in return, told me that Father was in the Hall of Warriors and the feast there had begun. Mael, kind man, kissed me on the cheek and said I was welcome in his house if I chose.

"Ceri said to be sure to tell you."

I walked back along the road, with the footsteps of many men following me, turned into streets and alleys that no longer felt familiar. Outside the front door I paused in consternation.

"I didn't pay the diggers."

"It's all taken care of," Ardwyad said. "Don't worry. It's all been settled."

Ceri had cleaned the kitchen and lit a fire on the hearth. A pot of soup simmered happily, trailing the scent of herbs.

"I'd like to be alone," I said.

Ardwyad gave me a long look, as if there was something he very much wanted to say, but not in anyone else's hearing. Ceri hugged me close and told me things would seem better in a few days. Finally they both went away.

I got a bowl of water from the bucket by the door and quenched the fire. I pulled on my padded leather jerkin and strapped my sword to my belt. Then I walked out into the empty street and headed for the Wheatsheaf Inn.

Ardwyad was already there. So were three other King's men. So was Tegvan, the innkeeper, and two of his oversized sons.

There was only one woman in the room, other than myself. She sat by the window, where daylight fell onto her right arm. A long rip stretched down the sleeve. She was using her left hand to stitch it closed, and doing a good job.

Her scabbard hung at her left hip, but that in itself meant nothing. Father often swapped his scabbard from one side to the other, to confuse potential opponents.

Possibly a left-hander, but I felt certain Father had been killed by a right-handed thrust.

She might be able to swap from one hand to the other. That was also a trick Father used sometimes, but he had never managed to teach me the way of it.

"Always study your opponent," he would say. "Learn as much as you can about him, preferably before he realises he *is* your opponent. Every detail can be useful."

She was almost as tall as Ardwyad, judging by the length of the legs that stretched out under the table. Broad-shouldered for a woman. Thick leather jerkin, shining with grease, scabbard the same. Nothing fancy, but quality goods and well cared for.

I became conscious of a quiver in my stomach. Ardwyad was right. Against this woman I had no chance at all.

Blood debt.

Father scoffed at the idea.

"What makes them think they'll do any better?" he would ask. "I've already killed their kin. Do I have to prove I can kill them too? Well, at least it's money. Isn't it, girl?"

It was. Fighting to the death pulled in crowds, and made coins clatter in heaps at the betting-tables.

"A pint," I told Tegvan.

"I don't want any trouble."

"You won't get any."

He drew the beer and pushed both tankard and coin towards me.

"It's on the house. Just don't get yourself killed. Your father would never forgive me."

"To Father," I said quietly, raising the tankard. "In the Hall, if he is already there. If not, may his path to it be straight and open."

"He's there. Don't you worry."

The beer was good, as always. Tegvan specialised in a hefty brew of his own devising, which Father had taught me to appreciate. The excellence of it was one of the few things he and Ardwyad openly agreed about.

"Another," I said.

"Just don't get yourself killed."

I carried both tankards over to her table, and sat down.

"Have a drink," I said.

She gave me an appraising look, such as Father turned on every man who entered the pits, and snapped the thread off with a sharp jerk of her hand. Slender fingers. Callused palms.

"I heard you did well yesterday," I added.

"Where did you hear that?" Her voice was a little deeper than I expected, though still womanly.

"Word gets around."

She smiled very slightly, as Father used to do after a hard fight against a skilled opponent.

"Who are you?"

Dark brown eyes, not unlike Ardwyad's, with the impassive stare of a fighter. Rich brown hair — very long, almost to her waist — gathered at the nape of her neck by a thin leather strap and flowing over her back.

"A swordswoman. Like yourself."

"You don't look like one."

I let it go. Plenty of men had said the same, and I had proved them wrong.

"Are you staying in town?" I asked.

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing. But I could use a companion who knows how to wield a sword, and the man you killed had friends here."

Again the unhurried stare, assessing my height and build and likely strength, noting the way I held the tankard in my right hand, noting the scabbard at my left hip, noting everything that could give her the advantage over me.

"So that's why the local garrison is out in force. Making sure I don't cause trouble, right?"

"Plenty of men want to see you dead."

"But no women."

"None that I know of."

She held my gaze. Painful it was, as if she had seized my eyeballs by thumb and forefinger and prised them out.

"But you're no traveller."

My clothes, I thought. Worn, yes, and stained by sawdust and sweat, but neither frayed nor torn nor dark with blood. My hands maybe, soft next to hers, clean nails trimmed close to my fingertips. My face perhaps, young and unlined.

"All comers. I make my living in the pits."

She tossed me a vivid grin that made me smile back before I was aware.

"Now I've got you. I knew I'd seen you before. You were in the shilling-pit, day before last."

The one-shilling pit. The fools' trap, Father called it, and pushed me into the wood-scented arena with an encouraging slap on the back. I had beaten every fighter's son in town in that pit, and most of the garrison recruits as well. Ardwyad came down to watch those and bawled out the hapless victims with a voice that thundered between the walls. Mael and Father watched him indulgently, and tried not to laugh.

"Crossed slash and cut to the wrist," she said. "I saw you do it twice. Very neat. What do you want a partner for?"

"I've thought about taking to the road. There's only so much money to be made from small-timers."

"Place open in the master pit. Dead man's boots."

Numbness spread through my limbs and throat and face.

"I'm not ready for that. Nor the second pit, either."

"You pay your own way and settle your own fights. If you draw sword or knife on me, you die. I leave tomorrow morning — made money enough to see me through for a while. Be here at dawn, if you want to come. If you're not here, I leave without you."

"Got it," I said, and drank the last of my beer.

Ardwyad did not follow me home as I left the Wheatsheaf. The light through my kitchen window had shaded to dusk when I heard the brief familiar knock on the door. He looked tired, but still he had a kiss for me.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Considering."

He put his arms around me and leaned his face against my hair. That used to comfort me, but now I felt only a chill through my insides.

"I've talked to my troop leader," he said. "I'm due out on patrol tomorrow, but he says I can take base leave for the week instead."

"Don't do that. I need to deal with this on my own."

Ardwyad pulled away, and gave me a searching look.

"You're not going to cause trouble after all?"

I tried to smile.

"You're right. I wouldn't stand a chance against her, and Father doesn't want me to throw my life away."

"Swear to me you won't."

I had never lied to him. Neither to Father nor to him.

"I swear." It was easier than I imagined. "I won't go after her. I'd only die, and Father would be furious. Just think what he'd say if I turned up in the Hall before he'd settled in."

Ardwyad laughed. The weariness vanished from his face, and the shadows from his eyes.

"It would be an education." He sat down on his usual stool, the one that had been Mother's. "Have you eaten?"

"Not since this morning."

"Get a fire under that pot and some bread on the table. I'm starved."

We ate together in comfortable silence, as Father and I had done evening after evening for years, ever since Mother died. Except when Ardwyad called on me, and stayed for the meal. There was not a moment of silence then. He and Father snarled at each other without pause, while I watched in exasperation.

"Why did you always argue so?"

Ardwyad swallowed his mouthful of bread.

"We never argued."

"Yes, you did. All the time — you never stopped."

"Drysi." He said it as Father did, gently loving, a sound that was like a caress. "We never argued. Not really. It was just his way — and mine."

I knew what he meant. Deep in my heart, I knew.

"Stay with me tonight."

There was a warmth in his eyes, a living fire, like the flickering embers on the hearth.

"I don't want you to take any leave," I said. "I meant that. But I don't want to be alone tonight."

"Of course I'll stay."

He left well before dawn. I lay with my arms around him and my head on his chest, listened to the beating of his heart.

"I've got to go," he said.

"It's still dark."

"After four by the courthouse bell." That was true enough: I had heard it strike. "My horse has to be ready before the six o'clock briefing. But I'll come back as quick as I can. Rough justice on the north circuit this week."

The chill emptiness of him leaving my bed, the rustle of cloth and clink of armour as he got dressed.

"Meant to have that strap end re-stitched," he muttered. "Nice little job for when I get back."

"Don't ask me."

"Wouldn't dare." He leaned over for a lingering kiss. "Promise you won't get yourself into trouble while I'm gone."

Footsteps across the floorboards, the thud of the front door closing, empty silence as I realised I was alone. I lay in the warm hollow he had left in my bed, cradled the blanket in my arms, and fought back tears. Perhaps I should stay.

Blood debt.

I wiped my eyes and scrambled out of bed, felt my way to the water bucket, gave myself a cursory wash. It did not matter much, I would not live long in any case, but Ardwyad had left me sticky and sore. The cold water was soothing. I tracked down clothes and boots, hooked my belt on, strapped my sword to it.

The sheets needed changing. The larder must be cleared. Hearth and floor should be swept.

I did none of it. I simply walked out of the house, left the door unlocked and the key dangling beside it. Ceri would come over in a few days, worried because neither she nor Mael had seen me, and I trusted her to do what was necessary. By then it would not matter to me, because I would be dead.

The courthouse bell struck five.

Darkness faded, let me make out shadows and angles. By the time I came to the Wheatsheaf Inn, the eastern sky was blushing.

Nervously I waited in the street. I dared not let Tegvan see me, and the danger grew with the light. If I remained much past six, Ardwyad's patrol would find me on their way towards the north gate.

Even as I thought that, the door opened.

She was fully as tall as Ardwyad, and I had not overestimated her build. With a brief nod of acknowledgement, she strode off. I followed.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Wherever."

"South?"

"Fine."

She walked fast. I hurried along, trying and failing to match her pace.

"What's the rush?"

"Wimp." That vivid irresistible grin. "I'll slow down for you today, but after that you keep up or travel alone." She shortened her stride fractionally. "I'm Karla," she said, as if tossing a scrap of food to a dog.

"Drysi."

"That's cute."

I frowned. No one had ever called me cute before.

"Why?"

"You don't know what *drysi* means?"

"It's just a name."

"In the south, it means thorny."

'My little thornbush,' Father used to call me, when I was a child and had tantrums. I never thought anything about it.

"You've travelled in the south?"

"First rule of the road," Karla said. "Ask no questions. But as it happens, I have. It's not too bad. You're sure of a fight, if nothing else."

The south gate yawned open, unattended in daytime. As we passed between the stone pillars, I realised with a shiver of the heart that I was on my own. There was no one to protect me: no Father, no Mael, no Ceri, no Ardwyad. I was alone.

Karla pounded along the road, at a speed I could barely match without breaking into a run. My shirt was already soaked with sweat, the crotch of my trews likewise. My feet inside their plain leather boots were burning hot.

"How long are we going on like this?"

"All day. If you can't keep up, travel by yourself. I'm not your mother."

I tried the mind-games Father had taught me. Detach yourself from your body and let it do its work; it is capable of far more than you imagine. Pain belongs to the body, so leave it there; do not allow it into your mind. Weariness is a failure of will, nothing more.

It was so hard.

Fields steamed around us. The sun peered over the horizon, shimmering in the misty haze. Workers moved through the green harvest, stooping and straightening. I realised with vague surprise that I could feel nothing below my knees.

"Where else have you travelled?" Maybe if I could get her to talk, she would slow down a little more.

"First rule of the road."

"So what's the second?"

"Give no answers."

Perfect.

"And the third?"

"Stick to those two for now."

On we went, while the mist dissolved into sunshine. That faded too, as soft grey clouds brought a welcome breeze.

"We'll stop here." Karla chose a grass-covered bank that dropped into a winding stream. I threw myself headlong on the ground, and lay there gasping.

"You're in lousy shape," she said.

Wisps of grass tickled the inside of my throat. I raised myself on my elbows and coughed.

"Drink some water."

At first I thought she was offering me some of hers, but the flask hung at her belt again. I realised she meant from the stream.

Painfully I crawled down the bank. The water rippled cool over my hand. I dredged up a splash, and sucked it in greedily.

"Time."

I leaned my forehead against the cool damp earth, fighting back the tears. There was no way I could go on.

"Move," Karla said. "Or I leave without you."

I crawled back up the bank, struggled to my knees and then to my feet. My legs felt strangely detached from my body, as if a jerkin had been folded several times and pushed in through the hip joints.

We walked on somehow. I kept moving, each step a fight in itself, my chest one single searing pain that would not ease. When we finally stopped, at a mossy dell wrapped in the golden glow of sunset, I had no thought of revenge, but was conscious only of a black exhaustion that pressed me to the ground.

"You look like you could do with some sleep," Karla said. She had dug out something crunchy from her knapsack and was eating it, washing down each bite with water from her flask. I just lay there, struggling for breath.

"I'll take first watch," she added. I had no idea what she meant, and did not care. I lay motionless, while the sun slipped below the horizon and the sky darkened into evening blue. The clouds had scattered a little.

It got darker, and colder. The ground was hard underneath me, and a stone dug into my thigh. My sweat-soaked clothes turned cold and clammy, sticking to my skin.

I lay there, more uncomfortable with every moment but too exhausted to move. The stone cut a hole in my leg. Ice closed around me, wet clothes chilling fast.

I thought of Father lying in a cold grave, and of Ardwyd sleeping in some field on the north circuit. If they could bear it, so could I.

I was frozen now. Frozen. A whole building site of stones gouged at my flesh. Somewhere in the darkness, Karla stirred.

“Midnight.” A boot thudded into my side. “You’re on watch. I want my sleep, too.”

Fragments of Father’s stories surfaced in my mind. Watching out the night, taking turns, half share of the work.

“Fine,” I said. Sleep? In this cold, without mattress or blanket or anything at all?

There was a rustle in the darkness. Karla yawned, and soon I heard her breathing slow. The bitch, I thought. She was sleeping.

My mouth was parched. I was hungry, too, and I needed to pee. With an effort I crawled a little distance away, laboriously undid the drawstring knot, and extricated myself sufficiently from my treads to do the necessary. Then I crawled back towards my previous position as well as I could judge, and sat there feeling wretched.

People did this out of choice?

A free life, Father called it. Free of comfort, at least.

Karla was definitely sleeping, incredible as it seemed. I heard her breath in the darkness.

I could kill her now.

The thought woke me up. My hand drifted to the knife at my belt. One stab to throat or heart, and she would never breathe again.

Father would despise me. I knew what he thought of those who killed without fair fight. Rats, he called them. Worse than rats: cowards. For him there was no insult lower than that.

I would be turned away from the Hall. No one wanted a coward for a drinking companion. Father would despise me, and I would despise myself.

I let go of the knife. Better to wait until morning, challenge her when she woke and die under her sword. At least then no could call me by that name.

My mouth really was parched. I should not have thought of drinking. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, the insides of my cheeks stuck to my teeth.

The ground was cold and damp. I brushed my hands over the grass, felt dew gather on my fingers and palms, raised them to my mouth and licked the moisture off. Again and again, reaching further out each time.

I was tired, too. My head felt heavy. I began to nod, pushed myself upright again, stared out into the darkness with eyes that felt full of sand. Cloud must have returned: there was neither moon nor stars. Only darkness, and Karla’s regular breathing, and my own weariness.

When I woke, with a guilty start, the eastern sky was paling pink. I could see the crest of the dell, and a shapeless shadow that must be Karla.

I sat there gazing at her while the light reddened the sky and the first thin finger of sunlight felt its way into the dell.

Karla stirred, and yawned. She lay for a moment longer, as if listening, then stretched her long limbs luxuriantly. She rummaged through her knapsack, brought out a pale disc and stuffed it in her mouth, washed it down with water from her flask. I followed every movement with my eyes, like a hungry dog begging.

“Right,” she said, stoppered the flask and hung it back at her belt. “Ready?”

“I’m thirsty.” I had meant to challenge her.

“Should have brought a flask.” She stood up and slung the knapsack on her back.

I struggled to my feet. My legs felt like sacks of grain underneath me.

“I’m too nice.” Karla took the flask from her belt and handed it over. “That’s my only fault.”

I tore the leather stopper from the neck of the flask and poured the water into my mouth, choking and gasping and not caring.

“Whoa!” She yanked it from my hands. “That’s my water you’re wasting.”

I could have cried. I think I did.

If she noticed, she did not show it. She turned and walked away, falling easily into the long steady stride of yesterday. I scrambled after her.

We walked. One foot in front of the other, endlessly, hopelessly, while the clouds thickened and the wind picked up. Rain began to fall, a steady drizzle that turned into a downpour. I leaned my head back, gaping, let the blessed water run down my tongue and throat.

The shower passed, and the clouds drifted away. The sun emerged, warm and bright. It dried my clothes for a while, until the sweat poured faster than the rain could evaporate.

“We’ll stop here,” Karla said.

We stopped. I lay on the ground, breathing heavily, and sucked the sweat from my shirt-sleeves.

“You’re not doing too badly.” She leaned against her knapsack and watched me critically. “For a sprat. Better than I thought.”

I raised my head with an effort.

“A what?” I wheezed.

“A sprat. A newcomer.” She grinned. “A virgin.”

“Very funny.” I let my head slump back on the warm wet grass. Sweat ran down my forehead, down my neck, curved around my breasts.

Whose brilliant idea was this?

“Time.”

I closed my eyes and willed her to change her mind. Not time yet — please.

“Move.” Karla was already on her feet. I got up with an effort I would have thought impossible two days ago.

We walked all that afternoon and evening, and stopped for the night by another stream. I drank and drank until I vomited, then drank again, not caring that the water was acrid and soiled. Karla chewed her discs and drank from her water-flask.

“I’ll take first watch,” she said. “You get some sleep.”

I crawled away from the water’s edge, slumped onto the dry soil between two giant tree roots, and slept like the dead.

Dawn was spreading through the sky when I woke, and clouds hung gilt-edged above me. I stirred awkwardly and looked around for Karla. She was a little way upstream, filling her water flask.

I crawled down to the water’s edge and lay there with my face half in the water, cool ripples caressing my skin. I felt awful.

“Ready?” Karla stood over me, grinning as if she found my plight hugely amusing.

“You didn’t wake me at midnight.” It was only a croak, but I managed to get something of a sting into it.

“I thought you could do with the rest. You’re taking all of tonight’s watch, though.”

My legs were working better today. Yesterday’s rain had cleared the air, and the morning was mild but fresh. I felt hungry.

Woodland approached the road, closing in over the fields. Soon we were in shade, surrounded by rustling leaves. The road no longer ran straight, but swept through bends and curves. Looking ahead, I could see nothing but forest.

As I watched, three men emerged from the shadows of the wood.

“This is where the fun starts,” Karla warned. “You take the one on the right. I’ll take middle and left.”

The gnawing hunger in my stomach turned into cold stream water.

They stopped a few yards away, blocking our path. Strong-looking men of average height, hessian clothes stained and frayed, plain stitched leather scabbards. They looked to have been living rough for a while: ragged beards, streaks of dirt over fabric and skin, blackened nails. Even at that distance, they reeked of stale sweat. Their scabbards were badly cared for, scuffed and worn, the leather cracked in places.

Not fighters. Robbers and cut-throats, not honest fighters.

“Ladies.” The man on the left started the talking. “Going somewhere?”

Karla gave him her impassive stare. “Through here.”

The man on the right grinned at me. I could see the dark gap of a missing tooth, and a knot where his beard grew over an old scar.

“Why in such a hurry?”

“No hurry,” I said.

“Purses,” growled the first man. “Hand them over, and don’t try anything. We might just let you live.”

“Can I have your word on that?” Karla asked.

The man spat, and drew his sword. There was a rasp of four other swords being drawn in response.

She was a little slower on the draw than I had expected, and she handled her blade as if it was a touch too heavy for her. I wondered if the fight with Father had tired her out. Bad luck for me if it had.

The men moved in closer, looking satisfied. It was clear that we were not going to be too much trouble.

Middle and right lunged for me suddenly, both at once. It caught me by surprise: I was prepared for only one opponent. I backed away swiftly, evading one thrust and blocking the other, having time for only a brief chill of fear. I had never fought two men at once.

Karla turned, hewed at the arms of the middle man and sliced them both off at the elbow. I brought my blade around and stabbed it into the right man’s stomach, pushing deep and hard.

It was easier than I imagined.

Father made me practise on pig carcasses. There was one strung up in the shed behind the second pit at times. Father said there was no great difference between a pig and a man. Mael told him to speak for himself.

My opponent collapsed onto the path, screaming. He dropped his sword and clutched both hands to his belly. A purple mass seeped between his fingers, bright red blood streaming over the skin.

I felt sick. Cold prickled at my face, my lips, my chest. Abruptly my knees gave way underneath me. I knelt on the path, stared at the screaming man, felt the bile rise in my throat.

"What are you waiting for?" Karla's voice was cool and collected. "Finish him off."

I shook my head feebly, striving for breath.

"Can't."

"Wimp." She brought her blade down and slid its edge across his throat. The skin folded open. Blood flowed from the dark line and spread over the frayed fabric of his shirt.

"Here." Something landed with a thud on the earth in front of me. A leather water-flask, its straps outflung like arms. "You don't want his, it's too bloody. Get his purse, though."

I looked around. Two severed forearms lay beside me, one hand still clutching a sword. There was a rust-mark on the hilt, dark red as an open wound. A few feet away lay the body of the middle man, his arms ending in bloodied stumps, his throat severed. Back where the fight had started lay the corpse of the left man, killed by a neat thrust to the heart.

I picked up the flask, opened it with shaking hands, drank the water. It was better than Tegvan's beer.

"Purse," Karla snapped irritably.

I closed the flask, slipped its straps around my belt and tied them together, then drew my knife. Around my opponent's neck ran a thin leather thong soaked in blood. I cut it, grimaced at the hot sticky mess, and pulled his purse from inside his shirt. It was light, but when I opened it I found six gold coins.

"They've been doing well lately," I remarked, trying to sound as much in control as Karla did.

"Not bad." She reached past me and took the coins. "Lousy fighters, though."

I staggered to my feet, staring blankly at the carnage.

"Should we bury them?"

"What for?"

I thought of rats and foxes, and birds with sharp beaks.

"No reason."

"Clean your sword and get moving."

I wiped my blood-smeared hands and blade on my opponent's clothes, the way I had seen Father do.

Many times I had watched him kill. It never disturbed me. I enjoyed the spectacle of the fight, the triumph of his victory. I saw his opponents as moving dummies. Never had I seen them as living breathing men.

Or women. Father killed women too, in the pits.

"Third rule of the road," Karla said. "Don't hesitate."

We walked on, left the dead bodies to be ravaged by all comers. Although the woodland shade was soothing and pleasant, I saw nothing before me but the skin of my enemy's throat unfolding under Karla's blade.

"Where did you learn to fight? Don't give me any of that 'first rule' stuff."

"You'll get yourself killed. Actually, I grew up fighting. Mother and Father were swordfighters both, and they taught me. Made their living in the pits, same as you."

"But you took to the road?"

The grin vanished.

"Worked the pits myself after Father died. Fair fight, the way he wanted to go. I did well enough." Shadows in her face now; shadows in her eyes. Still the same relentless speed. "When Mother died I didn't want to stay. So that's when I took to the road."

The road swept through the woodland, and out into more fields bathed by sunshine.

"Town," Karla said. "Small. A few good inns. We could stay the night, if you fancy."

"Suits me."

The inn we settled for was much like the Wheatsheaf. Bare wooden floorboards, sooty plaster walls, plain tables and stools, excellent brew. Hot food. I ate as I had never done before, stuffing my mouth with roast beef and buttered roots and gravy-soaked bread.

We were quietly immersed in the innkeeper's praiseworthy beer when a man walked up to me.

This one was definitely a fighter. Dressed as plainly as the robbers, but with numerous rents immaculately stitched, and a padded leather jerkin over his shirt. Scabbard well-greased and shining with good care, although to judge by the scuff marks it had been with him a long time. Iron hilt recently bound with new leather, no trace of rust.

"What's a nice girl like you doing here?"

Very original.

"None of your business."

He grabbed me by the hair and wrenched me to my feet. I had the sensation of my head floating free of my neck, before I slammed into the plaster wall with a blow that knocked the breath from my lungs.

"Watch your mouth, bitch."

He walked towards me unhurriedly, not even bothering to lay a hand on his sword. I glanced at Karla. She had picked up her pint again and was drinking slowly, paying no attention to anything else. The few other guests were watching with mild interest, seeing the assault as a short piece of free entertainment. The innkeeper was wiping down the counter, and looking resigned.

No one intended to help me. I had only myself to rely on.

I struggled to my feet.

A fist lashed at my face. I threw myself aside, barely evading the blow, and groped for my sword. Two steps back, and I recovered my balance. The sword was in my hand, in a forward block.

The whispered answer of a blade being drawn. Two blades. He held his sword in one hand, and in the other a long dagger gleaming.

The sword sliced at my neck. I threw my right arm up and across, deflected the strike, knew that my body was wide open to the dagger-thrust. I could hear Father cheering as I flicked my blade down to the dagger-wrist and severed its tendons.

A growl of pain, and the clatter of the dagger on the floorboards. I looked into his eyes and saw my own death.

I blocked his thrust with my left wrist slammed up against his right, and drove my sword through the base of his throat. He knew then. I looked into eyes dark with pain and fear and understanding, saw the spark of life in them, saw it wink out as he died.

"Well done," Karla said, setting her pint back on the table as his body slumped to the floor. "Very neat."

I stood there for a moment or two, trembling. Then I knelt, wiped my sword clean, sheathed it.

There was not much in his purse. I heaved him over onto his stomach and searched for the dagger-sheath. It was strapped to his jerkin with two wide leather bands that almost concealed it. The dagger itself was a beautiful piece of work: slim and keen, surmounted by a delicate hilt set with glass beads that shone in the evening light from the windows. The sheath was bronze, carved with intricate patterns inlaid with some other metal, gleaming silver cold. Together they made a treasure any robber would kill for. Now it was mine.

I stood up on shaking legs, and walked towards the table.

"Fourth rule," Karla said. "Watch your back. Seems you knew that one already."

I sat down and reached for my drink.

"You'll have to pay for the funeral," she went on. "Five shillings should do it."

No one would come to see a travelling ruffian buried, nor put a footstone on his grave. He would be collected by cart and taken to the burial pits outside town, where the bodies of hanged criminals were dumped. The carter's fee and something for the cleaning was all that was required from me. I counted out five shillings from the man's purse and put them on the table.

"Blooded at last." Karla grinned at me. "How do you feel?"

"Awful."

I wanted to scream, or vomit, or burst into tears. Instead I simply sat there, trying to emulate her ease.

"Sprat."

I could not kill her, I realised, looking into the hazel eyes. I could not kill anyone, ever again.

The guests at the other tables, after a general murmur of surprise at the way things had ended, began to settle back into the business of drinking. No one wasted another glance on the body on the floor.

I turned the dagger over in my hands, wondered how much it was worth.

“Showy,” Karla said. “You’re better off leaving it. Someone’s bound to spot you with it and start asking questions. King’s men, maybe, and you don’t want to mess with them.”

“I’ll just tell them I found it on the road. It’s the usual answer, isn’t it?” Father’s stories had taught me that.

“You could,” she conceded. “If you want to hang.”

At the table where the man had been sitting, a battered knapsack remained. Mine. I went over and picked it up.

A couple of stable-hands came in with a stretcher. They heaved the body of my late enemy onto it, showing neither surprise nor disgust, and carried him outside.

I brought the knapsack back to our table, undid the straps, rummaged through the few belongings. A woollen cloak, stained and worn with travel but neatly mended in several places. A half-empty jar of tallow for greasing, a few rags, a small pouch containing needle and thread, and a comb.

Not much to leave behind after a whole life.

I threw the dagger in with the rest, and strapped the knapsack closed.

“Now what?”

“Now,” Karla said with relish, “we get seriously drunk.”

She could hold her beer. As I staggered up the stairs to my room, Karla was dicing with another adventurer and looked set to drink him under the table.

The bed was soft and warm and comfortable. I threw myself on it without thinking to wrap the blanket around me, and was asleep in a moment.

When I woke in the chill of dawn, I had a vicious ache in the side of my head and the taste of sawdust in my mouth.

Cautiously I eased myself out of bed, drank the last of my water, and ventured downstairs. Karla was already having breakfast.

“Wimp!” she yelled, cracking my head open. “You look like a corpse.”

“Feel like one.”

The floor had been scrubbed. There was no trace of blood on the worn planks.

“Breakfast,” I told the innkeeper. He brought me a loaf of bread, a fist-sized piece of cheese, and a pint of beer. I pinched off a corner of the loaf and nibbled on that.

“Hurry up,” Karla said. “We leave at sunrise.”

“What’s the rush?”

“Who’s rushing?”

I felt so ill. I looked at her cheerful face, and thought of letting her leave without me.

“I’m ready.” I put the bread and cheese into my knapsack, left the pint untouched. Beer for breakfast. What madman thought of that?

She stood up.

“Time.”

It was. High time.

I felt too sick to fight.

We stopped at a well to fill our water-flasks. The sky was clear and bright above us, blushing in the east. I took the opportunity to rinse my face, yesterday's bath already a distant memory. I wanted a cosy bed, a bowlful of broth, some soap and a towel.

What I got was a solid day of walking.

That evening, as I ate my bread and cheese, I made a pact with myself. In the morning, I would challenge her.

Karla lay stretched out on the grass, her eyes closed in simple enjoyment.

"Fifth rule," she said. "Equal share of the work. You still owe me a full night's watch."

I leaned my head on my arms. I had forgotten.

The sky above us slowly darkened to ink. Karla faded to an indistinct shape, motionless on the ground beside me. Like a corpse, I thought, my heart wrenching. Like Father, or the countless many he had killed in fair fight, or the man I killed yesterday.

Tomorrow it would be me.

First rule: ask no questions. But I had to talk, if only to keep myself awake.

"When did you get blooded?"

Karla stirred.

"What? Oh, it was years ago. Fifteen years, maybe. In the pits. I'd never fought to the death before, but I needed the money. This adventurer showed up, giving me some crap about how women should stick to having babies — you know the kind of thing."

I nodded, invisible in the darkness.

"So I said: 'Let's make it interesting. To the death?' He just went pale. Of course he couldn't refuse, not after all the bragging he'd done in everyone's hearing. Tried to stammer something about it not being fair on me, and got filthy looks from the crowd. In the end he just said: 'Fine.' Lousy, he was. Couldn't parry to save his life."

She spoke so easily, so calmly.

"It didn't get to me until a couple of days later, when I was cleaning my boots. There were bloodstains on them and I hadn't got around to doing anything about it. So there I was, scrubbing away, and suddenly I started to throw up. Had to buy new boots. That wasn't so good."

"What did you need money for so badly?"

"Mother." It was more of a sigh than a word. "She was dying — had to be cared for, had to have something for the pain. Took her forever."

"But, I thought you said she died in a swordfight."

"I said she was a swordfighter. Father died in fair fight. Mother didn't." The voice from the darkness was cold and clipped, without emotion. "She wanted to. Said it was the only way for a fighter to go. So she fought to the death whenever she could, without armour, left-handed. In the end she fought with one hand tied behind her back, and she still won. In the end, she died in her bed. Painfully. Took a long time."

The night was cold. I shivered, and listened to the voice of the living dead.

"Don't give me any of that Hall of Warriors crap," Karla said. "She's there. She didn't die fighting, but she's there."

My eyes burned.

"Of course she is," I said.

It was a long night, but it ended. When morning came in shimmering violet, quietly stealing over our little camp, I was ready for death. I reached out and gripped Karla's shoulder, felt the muscles strong under her dew-damp shirt.

"Time."

"You're learning." Hazel eyes teased mine. Tousled strands of long brown hair slithered over her leather jerkin and tickled my fingers.

It had to be now.

"That man you killed," I said.

"Which one?"

There had been so many. Countless many.

"The last one. In the master pit."

"Him?" Her eyes brightened. "Bloody good, he was. Best fight I ever had. Crowd loved it."

They did, I knew: I heard them roar. I thought it was Father making the kill.

Karla stretched, then got to her feet.

"What about him?"

I watched her wordlessly. Tall and strong she stood, in her linen clothes and leather armour; moved with the ease of a fighter in her prime.

I could hear the roar of the crowd.

"He was my father."

There was no frozen moment, no hesitation. Her hand touched the hilt of her sword before her eyes met mine.

"Blood debt." Her voice was level. "Is that what all this was about? I'll tell you for free you haven't a chance. You're nothing like him."

That hurt. I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Maybe not."

"So I've already killed your father. Do I have to prove I can kill you too?"

I rose, and put my hand on the hilt of my sword. It felt strange. Colder and harder than it had ever done before.

"You do."

She was fast. Much faster than I expected. Two steps back were barely enough. I took another, and another. She lunged for the heart, the thrust that killed Father, and I was ready for it. I countered with a crossed slash, flicked my blade forward and down for the cut to the wrist of her sword-arm.

The bitch evaded me. She had studied me before I knew I was her opponent; learned how I fought, decided how to respond. Her free hand shot out and grabbed my sword-arm hard. My legs were kicked from underneath me and I landed heavily on the ground, felt an agonising crunch in my wrist, felt my sword slip from my grasp.

"I ought to kill you." Karla's boot leaned heavy on my chest. I stared up along the glinting blade that pricked my throat. "If you were anyone else, I would. Got that?"

She was not even out of breath.

"But I'm a nice person, and you're a silly child who doesn't know what she's doing. Cross my path again, and you die."

The weight vanished from my chest. She stepped away from me and sheathed her sword. I lay motionless.

"Sixth rule. Equal share of the takings. But if you turn on your partner, that's forfeit along with your life."

Slowly I reached for my purse with my one functioning hand, untied the straps and tossed the purse towards her. She kicked it aside. I heard the dull clatter as it struck the sword I had dropped.

"Now you know the rules of the road. Your fighting's crap, but you've got some talent. Work hard and you might just survive a few years more."

I stared up at her. The dark eyes were impassive.

"I'll let you live, for now. Because I could kill you as soon as look at you, and you must have known that, but you came after me anyway. Because you're young and stupid and desperate, and you think you've nothing to live for." She shrugged. "Call it the repayment of a debt."

I said nothing.

"You're stubborn, too," she added. "I don't want you getting any ideas about coming after me again. So I'll put you out of action for a while. Nothing personal."

Her boot thudded into my ribs, hard enough to throw me over on my side. The next blow was to my lower back. Someone screamed. It was me.

"Seventh rule," Karla said. "I made this one up myself. Shit happens."

That was when I died. I must have died, because one world could not hold so much pain.

When I came to, Karla was gone. I lay weeping in a puddle of vomit. After an age I hauled myself up onto my elbows, away from the mess and the stench. Damp dirt smeared over my fighting clothes.

My sword and purse lay on the ground several feet away. I dragged myself over to them and fastened them to my belt.

Then I began to crawl back towards the town.

"Thank you," I told the innkeeper, pushing a gold coin across the counter. He deserved it. Not even Father could have taken better care of me, these last few days.

"Glad to see you on your feet."

Karla had been thorough. My body felt as if it had been chopped up and boiled in vinegar. Nonetheless I could walk, and I could fight.

It was only morning yet, the daylight chill through the windows. I toyed with the notion of having a pint before leaving, then dismissed it. Were I to run into trouble, I would need to have my wits about me. Beer for breakfast would not help with that.

The inn door opened behind me. I glanced over my shoulder, caught a gleam of armour, took my hand from the hilt of my sword. King's man. He was no threat, and if I drew sword or knife on him, I would hang.

The next question was where to go. South was a bad idea, with Karla on the road ahead of me. North meant home, and I was not ready for that. Which left a choice of east or west.

A free life, Father called it. I understood him now. It was a strange but uplifting sensation, to know that I could go anywhere I wanted, and do anything I pleased, so long as I was prepared to settle my own fights.

Free, but lonely.

A large hand gripped my shoulder.

"Where have you been?"

I turned. Ardwyad was white with fury, and there was death in his eyes.

"On the road," I said. "Good morning, officer."

I thought he would punch me. For a moment his hands clenched into fists.

"Fine," he spat. "If that's how you want it. You're under arrest."

"What for? You can't arrest me without charge."

"You'd be surprised what I can do."

We stared at each other, locking eyes. Never mess with a King's man. Even Karla told me so.

"Don't make me disarm you and tie you to my horse as well."

He meant it, I realised in amazement. He actually would.

The innkeeper pretended to be fully occupied with wiping down the counter. There were no other guests in the room. There was only me and Ardwyad.

"I'll come quietly, officer."

"That yours?" He picked up my knapsack with one hand, seized my arm with the other and dragged me out of the inn. A chestnut horse was tied to the rail outside.

"Mount," Ardwyad said, and strapped my knapsack to the saddle, next to his own.

I heaved myself up awkwardly, having no experience of riding. He grabbed my leg and threw me the last yard.

"You're useless," he muttered, mounting behind me, forcing my thighs against the pommels. "I don't know why you're still alive."

"Luck, skill and judgement." I felt happy and careless and free. Even the thundercloud at my back could not damp my spirits.

He put his arms around me, rested his face against my hair. Two days' worth of stubble prickled the skin of my scalp.

"You witless fool."

"I know," I said, and leaned into his comforting embrace. "I love you too."

"How do you think I felt when I came back to find you gone?" Ardwyad asked me a few days later, as we sat together beside Father's grave.

"How do you think I felt when Father died?"

He made no answer, only gazed at the bare earth, absently reached out and picked a stray wisp of grass from it.

"First I thought you'd changed your mind," he said. "About me. Then I thought it had all got too much for you — that you'd—" He was silent again, tearing the innocent wisp into pieces. "Then I went to Ceri's. Have you any idea what she's gone through, finding you'd vanished like that? Not a word to anyone, as if nobody matters but yourself."

"Seventh rule of the road. Shit happens."

"I went back to barracks and talked to my troop leader, and got him to talk to the captain. Next morning the word goes out for every patrol on every route to ask after you. Because by then I'd realised you lied to me."

Father never wanted an offerings bowl, but his grave looked forlorn without one.

"So I thought to myself: she's gone after a master swordswoman, like the fool she is. She knows I'm doing the north circuit, so where's she most likely to be heading? South. I talked to my troop leader again, and he's sick of the sight of me, but he gave me leave to chase after you. Of course I knew you were already dead, but I still meant to find you."

Ardwyad's eyes were darker than I had ever seen them, dark with anger and fear. Desperate fear.

"Find you," he repeated. "Then find her, and kill her."

"She might have killed you."

"I'd have chanced it."

I thought of the pain I had carried in my heart since the moment I saw Father's body lying motionless in the master pit, his blood soaking into the wood-shavings underneath him. The smell clung to me even now.

"I had to go after her."

"You *lied* to me."

"If I hadn't lied, you'd have stopped me."

Ardwyad was silent. I met his gaze with an impassive stare. In the end, he looked away.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know." I turned my face towards the sun, breathed in the scent of earth and grass and life amid the graves. "I haven't decided yet."

Ardwyad found another wisp of grass to mutilate.

"There's a place open in the second pit," he said. "Aidan's moved to the master pit, and he's holding his own. Nobody's replaced him yet. Did Mael tell you?"

"He told me." Mael had called at the house one evening, asking no questions and expecting no answers, saying only that it was good to see me again, and that the place was there if I wanted it.

"First touch," Ardwyad said. "Nothing more."

"That's not for you to decide."

Bare, the grave looked. As if something ought to be there, in the earth above Father's corpse: some sign of love and remembrance.

"Whatever I choose to do," I said, "it's my decision. Not yours."

"Fine. Do whatever you want. It's not as if I care what happens to you."

There was a warmth in his eyes, a living fire, the same that flickered inside my own heart.

“Marry me,” he said.

“So you can tell me what to do every day of my life? Not likely.”

“You need keeping in order.”

“You couldn’t handle me.”

“If I can handle an inn full of drunk adventurers, I can handle a stroppy bitch like you.”

“Watch your mouth, errand-boy.”

Ardwyad smiled. A light breeze stirred the clipped strands of his hair, making them dance.

“Marry me.”

The sun was warm and the grass was growing, and there was life still, even among the graves.

“Of course I’ll marry you.”

He leaned over to kiss me, his lips gentle against my own. No stubble now: he had bathed and shaved and put on clean clothes. He had meant to ask the question here, beside Father’s grave, as Father always told him to do.

“First touch,” he said. “I’m not having anyone take you from me.”

In that moment I knew. As if I could see Father raise his tankard towards me, from where he sat by the long table in the Hall of Warriors, with Mother on his lap. I knew exactly what he wanted me to leave on his grave.

The dagger hung at my belt, half concealed by purse and water-flask. I unstrapped it, and scooped away a few handfuls of earth.

“What are you up to now?” Ardwyad grumbled. “That’s a sharp piece. Where did you get it?”

“Found it on the road.”

“Lucky for you I’m off duty.”

The dagger shone in the sunlight, glasswork blazing. I laid it to rest, watched its light wink out under the rich dark soil.

Father would laugh as I told him this story, many years from now, when we sat together in the Hall of Warriors, drinking to each other’s good health.

“What was that for?” Ardwyad was frowning.

I smiled at him.

“Call it the repayment of a debt.”



The Assassin's Gentleman

...Wade Albert White

It is only proper in this day and age that an assassin of good social standing has in her employ a butler, someone to assist in keeping her domestic affairs in order. Thus I took it upon myself to enlist as soon as possible the services of a new man after the untimely demise of my previous — my sixteenth, I believe. Or was it seventeenth? Whichever he was, I must say, reluctant though I am to speak ill of the dead, the unfortunate fellow had a poor eye for booby traps.

In any case, at the urging of the ladies down at the club and in an effort to keep up with current trends, I decided to try out one of the new robotic servants everyone had been raving about, a Butler XE-80. In trials they had supposedly registered a perfect record of performance, though I myself harboured more than a few doubts. I had spoken openly and vigorously on not just a few occasions of my reservations regarding automated valets, and so I kept my inquiries into the matter under wraps for the time being lest the good name of Ashleigh Yamamoto Wackrill become a laughing stock.

For my own satisfaction, I decided to put Humbert — that being the robot whose services I engaged — through his paces, a sort of personal trial period between us if you like. The relationship between a woman of my station and her butler is a delicate thing, and while I do not in any way consider myself particular, I do admit that I like things done just so. Humbert was, without the benefit of firsthand evidence to the contrary, potentially of no more use to me than a walking toaster, and when one is engaged on a regular basis in life and death struggles, one needs to have certain assurances that at the very least one's toaster can shoot straight.

I had an assassination scheduled for that week — the vice president of some political lobby group or other, I think; I really don't pay much attention to those sorts of details — and it seemed to me the perfect opportunity for a test run of the whole affair.

On the afternoon of the day in question, I was holed up in the library in the east wing of my estate with a cup of herbal tea — cultivated from my own biosphere — and some fascinating research on the history of garrotting (I must say, those

Spaniards really knew how to strangle a man). As I sat enraptured by images of iron collars, Humbert, my mechanical *maître*, entered. His presence was rather hard to miss given that he clomped about in a manner not unlike a minor earthquake just up from the countryside for a visit — roughly a three point two on the Richter scale, I should estimate. In fact, truth be told, Humbert had a bit of an eccentric look about him even for a robot. He reminded me of an antique brass coat rack of mine passed down to me on my mother's side, except with the legs of an African rhino and eyes like the headlamps off a 1924 Model T Ford. The mere sight of him startled not just a few of my guests, though at least the vibrations announcing his imminent arrival afforded them some measure of warning.

After the windows stopped rattling, I turned from my book to see what had brought him rumbling in and interrupting my peaceful seclusion when I felt I had made it perfectly clear I did not wish to be disturbed.

He held forth a tray upon which sat a note.

"A communication for you, sir," he said.

"Madam," I corrected.

"Sir?"

"Madam."

"Sir?"

I held my tongue. I pride myself in being one who is not often given to complaint and petty criticism, but I confess it pinched a nerve to have Humbert addressing me in the masculine. I'd had two technicians over for the better part of the previous afternoon to address the issue, but to no avail. They had lounged about, supposedly waiting for some part or other to arrive, eating sandwiches — *my* sandwiches, I should emphasize — until finally I shooed them out and bid them good riddance. At over a hundred quid an hour one expects a person to do more than just empty the larder.

This little SNAFU, trivial though it was, did not exactly make for a promising start between Humbert and myself.

"From whom?" I said, leaving aside for the moment his manner of address and accepting from him the note in question.

"A Mr. Birmingham I believe, sir."

I winced. Chester Birmingham was my first cousin on my mother's side, and while I'm merely reluctant to speak ill of the dead, I'm disinclined altogether to speak anything of certain of the living. Chester had been the proverbial thorn in my side from the very beginning of our acquaintance. He was a snivelling, conniving windbag who talked incessantly about the fluctuating prices of genetically modified pork and sent me telegrams on an almost daily basis about absolutely nothing of importance. The only remark I can make that is in any way positive, and I emphasize that it is a mere footnote to our relationship at best, is that Chester afforded me considerable practice during our childhood in the honing of my skills as an assassin. I'm just sorry none of it ever took.

The note read:

Need fourth for bridge tonight. Can you come?

See what I mean? What sort of a ninny goes around sending telegrams across town in search of a bridge partner? Especially when he knows perfectly well that: (a) I detest the game, and (b) my house is closer to his than is the telegraph office. Not to mention that nobody's been sending telegrams for well-nigh three hundred years now. It was all I could do to stomach the fact that we were related, and even in that I was quite certain the attribution was due to the grossest of errors by some quack doctor.

"My cousin," I informed Humbert, indicating Chester's likeness in a ghastly family picture my mother insisted I keep front and center on the mantle. Chester was the one in the middle with the flashing neon bowtie and the tail of a speckled trout dangling from his mouth.

I deposited the note back onto the tray in much the same way one releases a child's beloved yet recently deceased pet goldfish to its watery porcelain grave.

"I should like to issue a reply," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"A most emphatic 'No'."

"Yes, sir."

"In fact, make that two no's for good measure."

"Very good, sir."

"Can you underline it?"

"Sir?"

"Bold it out perhaps? Enlarge the font?"

"I would have to check with the operator, sir."

"Do."

My left eye twitched at the mere thought of spending the evening with Chester and listening to him prattle on in that high alto voice of his as to whether Morgan & Sons were overpricing their rump roasts.

"Humbert," I said, turning my attention to other matters, "I'll want us to be en route this evening no later than seven o'clock. Is everything ready?"

"I took the liberty of laying out the black ninja pyjamas for this evening's appointment, sir."

"Those will do nicely. And weapons?"

"Pistol and blackjack, sir."

"Scratch the blackjack. I'll require my sword for this one."

"I regret, sir, I have received word from the armoury just this afternoon to the effect that the hilt is still under repair."

"Still?"

"Yes, I am afraid so, sir."

"Drat."

On my last assignment I'd manoeuvred myself into the unfortunate position of being strapped to a moving conveyor belt headed toward a spinning saw blade. I'd had no choice but to thrust the hilt of my sword into the works to monkey up the gears. Needless to say, this was less than favourable treatment for such fine thirteenth century Japanese craftsmanship. I emptied two full clips from my twin antique Glock 18Cs into the fellow who'd trussed me up just to let him know how I felt about it.

The news of the sword dampened my mood. Political assassinations of this nature required considerable preparation and that certain delicate touch in which I prided myself. My client had specifically requested a beheading, one clean sweep of the sword, and I was loath to make any last minute changes. Still, one does what one must to fulfill one's obligations. But I knew the members of my Order would have a fine chuckle over this one. Byron Pillsbury for one — who couldn't choke the life out of a tree frog with the anchor line from the Titanic, I might add — would never let me hear the end of it. The pompous ass.

"Oh fine, then," I said. "The blow gun and a couple of throwing knives in its place. But not the ivory handles. I save those for special occasions."

"Very good, sir."

Truth be told, I was more disappointed that Humbert would not see me at my best. Not that I advocate inappropriate displays of martial ability in front of the help, but it is good to establish one's competence early in the going. I made the mistake of slipping up in front of my third butler — a rather dreary chain-smoking chap — and thereafter he hardly let me get a word in edgewise (despite the fact the hacker was hard pressed to say anything himself at all). I'm still not sure whether I truly missed spotting the landmine that got him or if it was subconscious wish fulfillment on my part.

My plan of attack that evening was simple. My target, the vice-whatever of something-or-other, was hosting a fancy-dress ball. I intended to incapacitate one of the guests at the gate and assume their identity, then once inside I would play it by ear. I assassinate mostly by instinct and consider it more of an art than a science. To my credit, I hardly ever kill the wrong person.

Humbert and I established ourselves in an alleyway several blocks south of the address. From there we could make unobstructed observation of all comings and goings. We crouched patiently as one after another of the guests paraded by in full party regalia. Perhaps I was more out of touch with the current trends than I cared to admit, but I had never witnessed such a spectacle of buffoonery in all my life. Pharaohs and Arthurian legends and Roman Centurions walked the streets that night, along with several notable Greek orators and even a peacock at one point — that, or an overly elaborate golden pheasant. But all were in one another's company, and I needed to single someone out.

Finally a trio of musketeers rounded the corner and headed in our direction, and I noted a slight shift in Humbert's stance.

"Yes, Humbert?" I said.

"If I may be so bold, sir, I believe the gentleman on the left has a game leg."

"Who? The large Cistercian-looking fellow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure?" I said. I prided myself on a keen eye and I had made no such observation.

"I saw him favouring it, sir."

"He's still a ways off."

"True, sir."

I studied the man in question.

"He seems sturdy enough," I said.

"I am quite positive, sir. I was using my telescopic vision."

"Very well. We'll take your word for it."

Frankly I questioned his appraisal, but I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. No good bringing him along to test his wherewithal if I didn't actually put it to the test. And soon enough the portly fellow in question did indeed fall behind. By the time he drew alongside our position he was well to the rear. A poison dart in the throat brought him down swiftly.

Now this perhaps counts as excessive measure to some, but the last thing I needed was to have some chap come storming in half-cocked on sedatives and pointing the finger at me before I'd accomplished my mission. No, I had long ago decided better safe than sorry in these matters. A certain amount of collateral damage is simply unavoidable. And in my opinion any man of rank who fancies himself a warrior of any sort whatsoever, be it musketeer or mounted knight or armour-plated cyborg, and yet can't detect a poison dart launched in his general vicinity, deserves his fate.

After relieving the poor bloke of his costume, we dumped the body in the back of the alley and ventured forth, I, according to the invitation, disguised now as the Honourable Justice Henry Richard Hollingsworth in a musketeer costume, and Humbert posing as his valet.

The invitation saw us through the outer gate and up to the main manor. The grounds appeared well kept, though I blanched a little at the assortment of golden streamers, red and blue swirling lights, and orange garden lanterns employed liberally as decoration for the party. It wasn't a mix to favour the design-conscious eye, and might best be described as the sort of display that either made you go looking for a strong drink if you hadn't already had one, or else inspired a certain degree of temperance if you already had.

Once inside, I directed Humbert to perform some reconnaissance about the room's perimeter while I intermingled with the guests directly and attempted to ascertain the whereabouts of our host. I had barely advanced ten feet into the room, however, when I was accosted by two military looking fellows, Justice Hollingsworth's comrades in arms, the chaps who had left him lurching along in their dust en route to the festivities. From the look and smell of them I deduced they were both sloshed to the gills, which may well have broken some record or other given they'd only set foot on the premises ten minutes prior to myself.

They more *collided with* rather than *joined* me, and one of them wrapped an arm around my shoulder — mostly for support, I gathered, from the way he leaned against me.

"Henry, old chum," slurred the leaner. "We're to sing our old preparatory school anthem for a trio of rather fetching Amazonians over by the punch table."

"Yes, Henry," chimed the other. "Amazonians."

I am a woman of modern opinion, and do not judge nor expect to be judged on the basis of outward appearances, most especially as they relate to gender, but I

was a trifle offended, even given their current state of inebriation, that upon close examination these two still mistook me for this Hollingsworth who had obviously been a mate of theirs for many years. I mean, I'm a master of disguise and all, but a woman still likes to know she's not prone to being mistaken for a three hundred pound limping bald man.

"Come, Henry," said the leaner. "We require your rustic baritone to woo these fine ladies."

"Amazonians," piped the other again, this time with a slight hiccup.

I have not survived this long in this business without the ability to think on my feet, and I knew no good could come of my tossing in with this lot even for the sake of maintaining a good cover. I put it to the lads that we might perhaps benefit from a brief warm-up in the cloakroom, a verse or two to loosen the vocal cords, and they took to the idea quite heartily. No sooner had I shut the door, however, and they began with, 'Dear old Wickham-Wattlesbury, how long thy leafless ivy grows,' than I pumped a poison dart into both of them. I felt a small tinge of guilt, especially for the one who took it in the eye, but mine is a dirty business at times and blood on the hands is simply part of the dress code. Still, I cautioned myself to tread more carefully from there on out and to move as inconspicuously as possible through the crowd since it was not my intention to reach my target solely by means of attrition. I hid the bodies in the back and waited for a good opportunity to slip out unnoticed.

I had yet to spot the host, so I mingled with the guests and entered into the mind-numbingly dull chit-chat one is forced to endure on such occasions. I complimented Henry the Eighth on his tights and Cleopatra Queen of the Nile on a stellar hairpiece. Emperor Constantine spilled wine on my sleeve, and I spent twenty minutes reassuring a very drunk Brutus he had in fact done the right thing. The peacock I avoided altogether. I didn't trust myself not to go reaching for the darts.

It was during my conversation with Lord and Lady Macbeth that the whole affair began to unravel. While listening to her ladyship rattle on about some horse she was sponsoring in a race that month, I made a quick check for my target, and who should I see (and feel) lumbering across the floor towards me but Humbert.

"Have you located him?" I asked. I had yet to see anyone myself who struck me as host-worthy.

"No, sir, but—"

"You're supposed to be watching for the host."

"Yes, sir, however—"

"Well, there's no time for small talk. Be on with it then."

"Indeed, sir, but while I was out on the patio with some of the other guests I—"

"Patio? Humbert, we're not here to socialize, we're here to kill a man."

It was at that point I noticed Lady Macbeth staring rather intensely into her drink, like Rodin's Thinker contemplating a whiskey-and-soda. I grabbed Humbert by the silicone-coated flexible steel springs he called arms and turned him aside. Despite the bodies piling up, the experiment was close to being dubbed a complete failure.

"You are up for this, are you not?" I continued in a harsh whisper.

"Yes, sir. But a matter of some importance arose and I felt it best to bring it to your immediate attention."

“Now see here, Humbert, if this arrangement is going to work, I quite expect you to—”

I left off there, not because I was at a loss for words, but because at that precise moment the air was cut with a voice so shrill I could only hope it was the call of death come to thrust me into the very bowels of hell for my many and various sins. For if the voice belonged to the individual I instinctively knew it did, I was already in hell anyway.

“Ashleigh!”

I am not ashamed to say I trembled on the verge on tears when upon turning around I came face to face with none other than my cousin, Chester Birmingham, carrying a plate laden with food and dressed in a peacock costume.

“Ashleigh Wackrill! I say, old girl, what brings you here? I had you pegged as against this sort of nonsense.”

To appreciate fully the impact of Chester’s voice, one must imagine a sound that begins just below the harmonic level at which crystal vibrates and moves upwards to the point where only wild animals respond in a frenzy. In fact, even as he spoke I am quite certain I heard several of the neighbourhood canines outside causing a ruckus.

I tried to ignore him, hoping beyond hope that he would simply remove himself and his avian attire elsewhere, but trying to ignore Chester is rather like trying to ignore a flaming blimp in the sitting room during midmorning tea and crumpets.

“What say you, Ash? Smashing jester outfit.”

I waved Humbert back to his duties.

“It’s a musketeer costume,” I said, “and I thought you were playing bridge tonight.”

“Couldn’t find three other players.” He popped two appetizers in his mouth at once and chewed them openly.

“Three? You telegraphed me to say you needed a fourth.”

“Needed a second and third too. No luck.”

It was all I could do to keep from reaching for my pistol.

“Well how in the world is it you ended up here instead? This is a very exclusive party.”

“Scalpers outside,” said Chester through a mouthful of sushi. “By the back entrance.”

This time I did actually reach for my pistol, though only to check and make sure I hadn’t already drawn it out and shot him.

“Go away,” I said. “I’m working.”

He stopped mid-chew. “Really? Here?”

“Yes. Now make yourself scarce.”

“Who is it?”

“Shove off, Chester.”

“Cicero?”

“I’m warning you.”

“Einstein?”

“I’m reaching for my knife.”

He turned to the Macbeths, who were still very much present and both staring harder than ever into their drinks. One might have thought them posing for the master Da Vinci himself.

“Did you know our little Ash here is an honest to goodness assassin?” he said. “I mean, popping people off, just like that. She’s quite good, you know. Won an award once, I seem to recall. ‘Most Kills in the First Year,’ wasn’t it? Watch you don’t say the wrong thing and upset her.”

He laughed.

I left the lord and lady wide-eyed as I dragged Chester by the scruff of his feathery neck into a corner. I told him in no uncertain terms that if he did not walk immediately from that spot to the front door, not stopping so much as to even pick up his coat — Lord knows what would have happened had he discovered my work in the cloakroom — and then in a direct line to his house, that I would make his death long and unpleasant in ways I suspect he had never considered a possibility. Something in my quivering eyes must have communicated to him that I was quite serious, because he walked a line to the door so straight it would have made a master architect weep.

Alas, however, the damage was done. When I was once again able to turn my attentions back to the matter at hand, I observed the Macbeths on the second floor balcony speaking with a man dressed as Caesar Augustus. The fellow was looking directly at me, and my instincts told me this was my target. Humbert was by this time, of course, nowhere in sight. I briefly considered tossing the whole business right then and there, but we Wackrills are a prideful lot and I knew, come hell or high water, I would see this through to the end.

The toga shrouded chap motioned for me to join him, and I saw no other option before me but to hold my head high and march straight into the lion’s den. Those Old Testament blokes had nothing on me.

Caesar and I exchanged courtesies by the balcony railing. I learned his real name was Edgar Witherspoon, of the south-end Witherspools, a detail I had either forgotten altogether or simply failed to learn in the first place, I don’t recall which. He invited me into his library for a private audience, which I declined politely saying I felt a bit of a headache coming on, to which he replied he kept some medicinals on one of the shelves, which I remarked was a very smart thing to do, a compliment he accepted most graciously, after which I said I should stop monopolizing his attentions and let him get on with chatting up the other guests, to which he responded the guest he was most interested in for the time being was the one trying to ‘off’ him. I conceded the point and accompanied him to the library.

We walked through a maze of hallways and corridors that gave one the distinct feeling the builders weren’t entirely sure themselves which way things were supposed to be headed. Finally, however, we reached our destination, and foolishly, though much to my own momentary joy, Witherspoon entered the room first. As soon as I closed the door, and while his back was yet to me, I whipped out my blow gun and fired.

I had no compunction about such an act that under most circumstances would be considered cowardly and most unsporting. I am an assassin, not a duellist. We don’t

walk up to our victims and challenge them to cups of Hemlock at forty paces. We shoot, strangle, and stab at the first opportunity. From the front, from behind, above, below, it doesn't matter. We aren't choosy. Yes, of course, there is a degree of style one always wishes to achieve. We're not back alley thugs — well, not in the main, I should emphasize — but getting the job done is the first and foremost priority.

So, as I said, I shot him. Or made the attempt anyway. But Witherspoon was obviously not as unfamiliar with the assassins' code (or lack thereof) as I might have thought, because no sooner did I have the blow gun in hand than it was knocked aside. The shot went wide and struck a bust of Vivaldi dead center, which under any other circumstances would have suited me fine. I'd never really taken to the fellow's style of music; too many shenanigans going on in the strings section.

Before I could recover, twin metal arms encircled me from behind with none too little force and I found myself hard pressed to draw a full breath let alone extricate myself.

"Do say hello to my man," said Witherspoon.

I thrashed about but my assailant cracked me a good one on the back of the head. It hurt like the dickens.

"Please do not struggle, sir," said a familiar voice. "I am quite capable of holding you indefinitely."

I craned my neck around in order to confirm with my eyes what my ears were already telling me. It was none other than Humbert. I felt the perfect fool.

Witherspoon reclined on the chesterfield and lit up a cigarette.

"I've studied up on you, Wackrill. I suspected my opponents would be looking to take me out of the running sooner or later, and I knew they would use only the best in the field. The best, you might be honoured to know, is you."

I acknowledged the compliment with a slight nod.

"I understand you have a marked aversion for robots," he continued, "but I must admit I find them rather handy myself at times."

"I can see how they might possibly be of some use," I said.

"When you're not the one they're attacking, of course."

"There is that."

Witherspoon gestured to some forms on a side table.

"I had planned to bring you up on charges of conspiracy," he said. "I even had someone ready to draw up the papers. But Justice Hollingsworth seems to have disappeared for the moment, so I suppose I shall simply have to kill you."

"A bit rash," I said. "I've always believed a person should fully explore the alternatives. If at first you don't succeed, and all that."

He leaned forward and studied me closely.

"Pardon me for saying so, but for an individual with your reputation I rather expected more of a challenge than this."

"Yes, well, I've been having some difficulties at home, don't you know. Trouble with the domestic staff."

"It is hard to find good help these days."

"So it would seem."

He rose and walked over to the mantelpiece. Above it rested a fourteenth century Japanese sword — Kamakura period, if I wasn't mistaken — which he brought down and drew from its sheath.

"I believe this is more or less what you had in store for me, yes?"

"Give or take a century."

"Then I shall send you off in the manner you intended for me. Ironic, don't you think?"

I had a particular distaste for ironies, partly because whenever I encountered one it inevitably meant I stood on the brink of almost certain death, and partly because having them pointed out to me meant I was usually in the company of that disposition of character I most thoroughly detested, namely, the literary smart-ass.

"Any last requests?" he asked.

"I could rather do with a stiff brandy."

"I'm afraid I'm out."

"Ah. Then no, nothing for me, thank you."

Witherspoon swung round with a hearty effort, and I must say I can at least admire a man who puts himself fully into his work. None of that hack and chop stuff for him with lots of half severed limbs and victims scrabbling about on the floor crying, 'My God, my God.' No, he was obviously one to go for the single thwack and be done with it. I could respect that.

Time took on that slow motion quality for which such moments are remembered — or not remembered as the case may be — and various events from my life paraded themselves before me. In fact, I was just recalling where I'd misplaced my mother-of-pearl earrings when I found myself suddenly thrust to the floor in the most ungentle of manners. The distinct clank of steel on steel reverberated through the air, followed thereafter by a strangled scream which was itself cut off by the thud of a blade cleaving flesh and bone.

An object landed on the floor beside me. I opened my eyes and found myself staring into the face of one Edgar Witherspoon, albeit minus the torso and, by extension, all appendages located below the neck. Those lay in quite another direction altogether.

I rolled to my side and looked up.

"Humbert?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you just decapitate Mr. Witherspoon?"

The bloodied sword, now grasped firmly in Humbert's steel plated fist, along with the two formerly attached parts of Witherspoon, had already tipped me off to the fact. But it never hurts to double-check.

"Yes, sir."

"I declare, Humbert, can you not retain an ounce of loyalty to any of your employers?"

"I assure you, sir, that I have remained loyal to you and only you throughout the course of this entire affair."

I rubbed at the swelling lump on the back of my head.

"Oh, yes, I must have missed that part. My apologies, then. A sound beating can affect a person's mind that way."

Humbert assisted me to my feet.

"It is the matter I came to speak with you about earlier, sir, down on the main floor."

"Come again?"

"I had come to tell you that I witnessed your cousin, Mr. Birmingham, whom I recognized from the photo you showed me this afternoon, spilling a drink into the open access panel of Mr. Witherspoon's robotic valet on the garden terrace. The mechanical gentleman had been experiencing some difficulties, and Mr. Birmingham claimed to be something of a handyman in respect to all matters electronic. It would seem he shorted the circuits quite thoroughly. Taking hold of the opportunity, I approached Mr. Witherspoon in his study — before he had emerged to entertain his guests — under the guise of seeking employment and inquired whether he was in need of my services. He scanned my records, but since you had not yet engaged me in an official capacity he gained no knowledge of our association. Coupled with your known aversion for robots, which he would most certainly have learned through his earlier study of you, I imagine he felt he was quite safe enlisting my help."

"Well," I said.

My head was spinning with the matter. I am not by any means slow-witted, but my life had changed hands so many times that evening I began to question whether I could trust even myself.

"Well," I said again, because sometimes one 'well' simply isn't enough. "Good show, then, old bean."

"Thank you, sir."

"Really, it was quite spitting of you."

"Not at all, sir."

I rubbed my head again.

"I believe I shall require a very strong drink when we get home, Humbert."

"Very good, sir."

"Ma'am," I corrected, hopeful.

"Sir?"

"Ma'am."

"Sir?"

It was a small price to pay.

This is Not a Love Song

...Lyn Battersby

This is not his Diane. This is Diane Before; before Ruby's funeral, before her birth, before pregnancy, marriage and courtship. This is Diane before his time, Diane of a past that doesn't include him.

Carl peers through the kitchen window as she assembles her ingredients: a whole chicken, large can of mushrooms in butter sauce, bottled chilli and a jar of garlic. Measuring spoons and a casserole dish appear on the counter and she is ready.

She starts singing. It is Christmas and she is singing 'Oi To The World', her head banging along to The Vandals as she separates wings and legs from carcass.

Carl hates The Vandals. In fact, Carl hates all things punk. The Slits, The Sex Pistols, Green Day; he disdains them all. Diane, his Diane, played punk when she was either alone or angry at him. She's not angry now, but she is alone.

Not for much longer. In two and a half hours she will leave the house carrying a dish filled with Mushroom and Chilli Chicken and drive to her mother's for Christmas lunch. She will knock at the door and smile at the first person she sees. Her smile will falter when she realises she doesn't recognise him, but she will kiss him anyway and wish him a Merry Christmas.

At that moment she will become his Diane. She will meet him for the first time and he shall know her for the last.

But for now she remains unaware, content as she is to measure, pour and mix each ingredient. The song finishes just as she spoons the mixture over the waiting chicken. It never fails. No matter the song she can always make the preparation of this dish last exactly the length of the lyrics. From James' 'Laid' to Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' she always times it down to the second. Well, almost always. There was that one time when he'd hidden the ingredients and it took nearly a whole song to find them again. An hour of Johnny Rotten had been his punishment and he'd taken it like a man.

The casserole dish is deposited into the oven and Diane disappears upstairs to shower and change. She will dither over three outfits but in the end will choose a short black skirt, red t-shirt and ankle boots. Her blonde hair will be topped by a red bandanna.

It is time for him to go. He leaves his place by the window, walks the three kilometres to Ellen's house and hides in the shrubbery by the driveway. One day

Ruby will die here, at her grandmother's house, another statistic of cot death. But not yet. This is not that time. He is here for this day. This is the moment that counts. The future can take care of itself.

He doesn't have to wait long. A black Ford slows, indicates and turns into the long driveway. A young man exits and locks the door.

Carl stands.

For a moment the two men stare at each other, as they must. This is the moment, the instant of recognition. This time is different, however. This time Carl is the one who raises his fist, knocking his younger self into the bushes and taking his place at the party within. Young Carl's life will begin later, when Diane finds him and tends to his wounds. Carl doesn't care about his younger self. That chapter is over.

"Carl, you made it!" The door opens and his boss welcomes him. "Diane should be here any minute. I can't wait for you two to meet."

He smiles at his future mother-in-law and silently thanks her for this second chance.

Ellen is passing him a beer when the doorbell chimes.

"I'll get it," he tells her.

Diane, his Diane, stands there, clutching the casserole dish with oven-gloved hands. Her smile falters, then reasserts itself.

"Merry Christmas," she says as she drops a light kiss on his cheek. "You must be Carl. I'm so sorry about the matchmaking. My mother—"

"Is a saint. Let me take that for you. Mmmmm. Mushroom Chilli Chicken. You have no idea how much I love this dish."

She hands it over and follows him into the kitchen. Her mother is right. They do hit it off straight away.

They won't last. Ruby's funeral will be the first. Diane's will follow not too many months later. And one night, six years from this one, he will crave this one meal and somehow his need will be enough.

And the cycle will start again.



The Witch Maiden and the Dragon: A Riff

...Ellie Tupper

Once long ago and far away, my dears, there lived by the side of the forest an old woman who had two sons. Perilan was the elder, and handsome and clever. The younger son was called Lump, and no one thought he was handsome or clever at all. He took care of their pig and their goat and their six chickens, and he helped his mother in their little garden.

Well, one day there appeared, in that part of the world, a fearsome monster that some called a dragon. It had great long teeth as sharp as diamonds and it was covered with silver scales that no blade could dint. The monster's body was bigger than ten oxen, with two short legs in front and two long in back, and it had a tail six oxcarts long. It could not fly, but went by leaping, and every leap covered five leagues. Its eyes were the size of cartwheels and red, and when it stared at any living thing, be it chicken or churl, that creature was bespelled into walking straight into the dragon's mouth. It ate everything, corn and cows, horses and haystacks, but most of all it liked man.

The dragon would leap once, twice, and land in a country. There it would eat, and what it couldn't eat it burned, so that soon the countryside was in ruins. Then the dragon would leap once, twice, and go on to the next.

Soon it drew near to the land where Perilan and Lump and their mother lived. The king of the country sensibly sent out a proclamation that anyone who slew the dragon would win a cartload of gold. So of course many ambitious youths came out to have their try. But some took one look at the dragon's clawmarks, where it had leaped once, twice, and remembered they had to do the plowing at home; and some saw the ashes of the barns it burned, and remembered they had to chop kindling at home; so not many actually made the attempt. And those, the dragon ate, knights and nobodies, halfwits and heroes.

So the king sent out another proclamation, saying whoever slew the dragon should have not just the cartload of gold, but his eldest daughter to wed as well. So more ambitious youths came from other countries, and some came back from their fields and woodpiles, and they all tried. And those the dragon ate too, prince and plowman, chopper and champion. Then it burned a village for good measure, and leaped once, twice, so that it was within a league of the king's palace. At that, the king sent out one more proclamation, that the man who rid their land of the monster should have anything he wished: gold, princess, the kingdom itself.

When he heard that, young Perilan declared he would have a try at slaying the dragon. His old mother wept and begged, but Perilan only laughed and promised her a golden shawl with diamond fringe, and he took a loaf and his big quarterstaff and set out for the palace. Lump stayed behind to take care of the pig and the goat and the chickens, and help his mother with their little garden.

As Perilan was strolling along twirling his big quarterstaff, he came upon an old pedlar-woman by the side of the road. Knowing it's always prudent to be polite to crones in stories, he greeted the woman courteously, "Good morrow, old mother."

"Good morrow, young sir," the pedlar-woman replied. "And whither may ye be bound?"

"I'm bound for the palace, to slay the dragon and win gold, princess, and kingdom," said Perilan.

"You'll never slay it with that toothpick," said the old woman. "You'll need magic."

Perilan knew she was right, but he was proud of his big quarterstaff. Fortunately, he remembered in time that one must be polite to crones in stories. "And where might I find that?" he inquired.

"You must travel far to the east and find the Witchmaiden of the Wood. She has all the magic power a lad like you could need."

Perilan was clever as well as handsome, so he said shrewdly, "The east is a very big place. How will I find her?"

"You have been polite to me," said the pedlar-woman, "so I will help you. Here is a special powder. Put it in your tea every morning and then you will understand the language of birds. They will tell you where to find the Witchmaiden of the Wood."

Pleased that his courtesy had worked, Perilan accepted the magic powder and gave the old crone a kiss on the cheek in thanks. Then he turned and hastened toward the east. He traveled night and day, week and month, and every morning he put a pinch of the special powder in his tea. And it did indeed give him the ability to understand the language of the birds, so that he was never lonely on his travels but always had gossip and song to listen to, even if it was mostly about bugs and territory.

One fine morning, as he strolled along, he noticed two birds in the tree above him. They were unusually beautiful, with long golden plumes and bright blue wings. One said, "There's a fine young lad with a big quarterstaff. Our mistress, the Witchmaiden of the Wood, would like him well."

"Ah," said the other, "but how long would she keep him? She grows bored with her young men so quickly, and then she turns them into rabbits." And it sighed sadly.

"If only they knew the secret to winning her heart," said the first. And you may be sure Perilan, down on the road, listened with all his ears. "If only a young man would stroke the middle toe of her left foot, she would be his forever. But they never learn."

"No, alas. And there are far too many rabbits as it is. If she'd turn them into frogs, now, we could eat them."

Perilan blinked at this, but kept listening. Unfortunately, though the magic powder allowed him to understand the language of birds, he couldn't speak it, so all he could

do was hope the birds' conversation would turn, eventually, to where he might find the Witchmaiden.

Luckily, the first bird looked up to say, "It's nearly noon. We must hurry back to the castle to sing while our mistress bathes." So they both took flight, and Perilan ran through the woods after them. The birds flew slowly, for their long beautiful plumes were heavy, so he was just able to keep them in sight.

At last they flew into a clearing in the woods where there was a lovely greensward, bustling with rabbits, and in the center of the sward lay a crystal pool. The two birds flew to the topmost bough of a willow tree that overhung the pool, but Perilan sat on the grass at the edge of the clearing to see what he might see.

Scarcely had he settled down, shooing aside a rabbit that promptly scratched him, when the loveliest maiden he had ever imagined appeared at the other side of the clearing. The two fabulous birds burst into music so beautiful it would have made wizards weep, but when the Witchmaiden opened her lips to sing with them, her voice was so exquisite the birds sounded like the scrape of a saw.

Singing, the maiden shed her silken robes and stepped into the crystal pond. There she bathed and swam, and Perilan had never seen anything so graceful. At last she rose from the water, dried herself with an ermine towel, and dressed. Then she looked up, and saw Perilan sitting there under the tree with his big quarterstaff.

At once she strode around the pool to stand before him, and her anger was as dire as a red dawn. "Who are you who dares spy on me?" she demanded, with a thunderstorm in her voice.

"Only I, a poor youth," said Perilan humbly, but at the same time he reached out and stroked the middle toe of her bare and lovely left foot.

The Witchmaiden smiled, the sun came out, and she said, "You are a fine young man, and I rather like your quarterstaff. Come with me and we will dine."

So she led him to her castle and there they dined and rejoiced day and night, week and month. The Witchmaiden gave Perilan everything he wanted, and in his turn Perilan made sure to stroke her toes frequently. The Witchmaiden showed Perilan all over the castle, displaying riches beyond his imagination, and vowing they were now all his, as she was his.

One day the maiden took Perilan up to the highest tower chamber in the castle, where on a low table stood a small wooden box. "Here," she said, "lies my greatest treasure, a magic ring. If I put this ring on the little finger of my left hand, I can fly like a bird. If I put it on my ring finger, I become invisible. If I put it on the middle finger, I become invulnerable to any blow or accident. If I put it on my forefinger, I acquire strength greater than twenty men. And if I put it on my thumb and speak, no one can oppose me."

At once Perilan realized this was the magic he needed to slay the dragon and win gold, princess, and kingdom. But he was clever as well as handsome, so he said, "Can such magic really be?"

"I'll show you," said she. So she put the ring on her ring finger, and instantly vanished from sight.

"My word," said Perilan. "But remind me, what else does it do?"

The maiden put the ring on her middle finger, and took Perilan's dagger and showed how it wouldn't even reach her skin. She moved the ring to her little finger and flew around the room, and then she put it on her forefinger and picked Perilan up with one hand. "Oh my," said Perilan. Last, the maiden put the ring on her thumb and said, "Let's go take a look at that big quarterstaff of yours," and they put the ring away and went downstairs.

But the next day, Perilan stroked the maiden's toe and asked to see the ring again. The Witchmaiden could deny him nothing, so they climbed the tower and she showed him the ring. "Would it work for me?" Perilan asked.

"Of course," said the maiden. So he put the ring on his middle finger and tried, first cautiously and then as hard as he could, to cut himself with his dagger, but the ring protected him. Then he put it on his ring finger, and the Witchmaiden stared around the chamber but couldn't find him until he pinched her bottom. Then he put it on his thumb and said, "Kiss me," but of course she would have anyway. So he said, "Stand by that far wall," and she obeyed. And Perilan put the ring on his little finger and jumped out the window and flew away, leaving the Witchmaiden first shocked, then stamping in rage, in her empty chamber.

Perilan flew all the way home and landed in the courtyard of the king's palace. This startled the guards into a prickle of spears and arrows, but Perilan moved the ring to his thumb and ordered, "Tell the king I am here to slay the dragon and win gold, princess, and kingdom." Instantly the guards obeyed.

Because the dragon's skin was covered with scales harder than steel, Perilan knew it couldn't be killed with spear or sword. But because he was clever as well as handsome, he thought up a plan. He ordered a huge steel pike be made, sharp as a needle at both ends. He ordered an iron cart be made, with iron wheels, and a helmet to cover his head with a vizor that was polished smooth as a mirror. Finally he commanded a chain be made, thick as a man's leg and ten fathoms long, and two enormous iron pegs.

When all these things were finished, Perilan had the pike and the chain and the pegs put into the iron cart, and he put on the polished helmet and put the magic ring on his forefinger. Then with his magic strength he pushed the cart out to the field where the dragon lay. It was a near thing, because he would have to get the cart close to the dragon with his strength, then quickly switch the ring to his middle finger to make himself invulnerable to the dragon's attack. But this he managed, and when the dragon had exhausted its fire on him, Perilan lowered his mirrored vizor and stood up to face the dragon. The dragon glared at him with its cartwheel-sized eyes to enspell him, but all it saw was its own reflection. And Perilan moved the magic ring to his thumb and said, "Bite me."

Twice enchanted, by the ring and its own red glare, the dragon had to obey. But as it struck, Perilan thrust the pike into the dragon's giant maw, pointed up and down. The jaws champed down onto the pike's sharp ends and stuck, still wide open. Then Perilan switched the ring back to his forefinger and tied the pike in place with the heavy chain, anchoring it with the two enormous pegs. The dragon roared in fury but couldn't move, and before it could summon more fire, Perilan put the ring on his little finger and flew out of reach.

And there the dragon stayed. It struggled and thrashed, and the blood from its maw hissed and boiled along the ground, and its tail beat a tremendous groove in the earth. But eventually from hunger and loss of blood it fainted, and then Perilan put the ring on his forefinger, picked up a boulder twenty men could not lift, and beat the dragon on the head till it was dead.

The king called for a week of celebration, and during that week Perilan married the eldest princess in a ceremony of great grandeur, and the next day the king crowned him his heir in a ceremony of even greater grandeur. Prince Perilan had his mother and his brother Lump move to the palace with them. He gave his mother the golden shawl with the diamond fringe, but Lump had brought the pig and the goat and the chickens with him and refused any gifts, saying he was happy with what he had. They gave their little house and garden to the old pedlar-woman, along with enough gold to live out her years in great comfort.

And they all lived happily ever after, until the Witchmaiden heard about it.

One day as they all sat at lunch in the palace garden, a vast thundercloud rolled up and the sky grew dark and all the napkins blew away. Then out of the dark cloud flew a silver boat, pulled by two fabulous birds with long golden tails and sapphire-blue wings. One look at the birds, and it suddenly occurred to Perilan it was time to go fetch the brownies for dessert.

But before he could leave, the silver boat settled to the lawn and out stepped the Witchmaiden. She wore ruby-studded robes of rich black velvet that swirled around her like storm winds, and thigh-high black boots with bronze toe caps. She pointed at Prince Perilan and commanded, "Halt, perfidious churl!"

Perilan halted. "I was going to bring it back—" he began.

"You won my heart and yet betrayed me! You stole my most precious treasure and fled like a thief. You and your big quarterstaff!"

The king's eldest daughter was looking back and forth between them like a spectator at a shuttlecock game. "You showed her your big quarterstaff?" she demanded.

"Knew that thing'd get you in trouble," muttered Lump.

"I'll give you anything!" said Perilan. "You can have the ring back. Forgive me, dearest Witchmaiden!"

"Dearest Witchmaiden?" said the king's eldest daughter.

"I should turn you into a rabbit!" bellowed the Witchmaiden. Her ebon robes flew on the wind as she raised both slender arms to cast her spell. Tablecloths whirled in the tempest.

Perilan fell to his knees before her, saw the bronze toe caps, and curled up with his hands over his head. "Forgive me, tickletoes!" he sobbed.

"Tickletoes?" said Lump.

But the endearment struck deep into the Witchmaiden's jealous but still loving heart, and she lowered her arms. "Oh very well. You can have your gold, and your princess," she said, with a hard look at the king's eldest daughter, who matched it, "and your kingdom. You can even keep the wretched ring. But I will have my vengeance. Lo!" she cried, "three things will befall you, craven cad. First, you shall

fall under a spell that no creature can break: if ever you leave the borders of this kingdom, you will instantly turn into a rabbit!"

The king looked thoughtful.

"Your dead dragon will putrefy, and its evil humors will poison the land, the air, and the people forever!"

The king's eldest daughter, who liked perfume, looked thoughtful.

"And your big quarterstaff will now belong to your brother Lump!"

The king's youngest daughter, who hasn't been in the story yet but was there all along, looked thoughtful. So did Lump.

"No!" wept Perilan. But then, because he was clever as well as handsome, he pulled himself together and got up. One must always be courteous to old crones in stories, but even more must one be courteous to furious Witchmaidens. Besides, he was going to be king one day and it was better to have a sorceress on his side than not, especially since it appeared he wouldn't be able to go off to war at all effectively. "I regret my perfidy with all my heart," he said. "I willingly accept my punishment, and I hope that you will be satisfied and that we may be friends. Would you like a brownie?"

"I'd love one, but I think I'll be losing my appetite soon," said the Witchmaiden. Indeed, as she spoke, the first whiff of the dead dragon began to drift over the palace walls.

Her spell was as effective as any woman scorned could wish. Within a day, the dragon ponged so badly people's eyes watered for miles around. The king sent out a proclamation, skipping the gold stage and going straight to offering his youngest daughter's hand and an earldom to anyone who could clean up the mess. Ambitious youths gathered to try their hand with bucket and butcher knife, hacksaw and haul. But the dragon's hide was as impervious as ever, it was too big to move, and the stench was enough to shrivel nose hairs at thirty paces.

Then Lump went to the king and said, "Sire, I will clean it up, but I'll need the help of my brother Prince Perilan and his magic ring." And the king said, through the perfumed handkerchief over his nose, "By all beads."

So Lump collected a cartload of coal and a cartload of oil and two shovels, and he and Prince Perilan pulled the carts out to the dragon's carcass. When they got within half a mile of the corpse, Perilan took out a bottle of rosewater to sniff, but Lump just breathed deeply and smiled. When they got within a quarter of a mile, Perilan went to his knees and was sick, but Lump's nose just twitched. And when they got to a few yards off, Perilan's front hair frizzled. But Lump only sneezed.

"How can you face this dreadful smell, brother?" Perilan choked.

"I take care of a pig and a goat," said Lump. "Not to mention the six chickens. And you never asked why our vegetables were so big. Help me with this coal now."

Together they shoveled half of the coal into the dead dragon's gaping maw. Then Lump poured half of the oil over the coal and threw in a match.

The fire burned for a day and a night and the smoke could be seen from five leagues away. When it had burned itself out, people saw a marvelous thing. The skin and bones of the dragon still stood, but the putrid flesh had burned down to ash inside it. "Time for the ring," said Lump, and he gave a shovel to his brother.

“Why me?” demanded the new Prince.

“You caught it,” said Lump, “you clean it.”

So Prince Perilan put the magic ring on his forefinger and cleared out the ash, remarkably quickly. Then Lump stuffed the hollow with the rest of the coal and oil, down to the deepest end of the dragon’s tail, and burned it, the smoke visible for ten leagues. In the end the dragon’s entire hide was empty, supported only by its bones and some clever framework Lump designed. It stayed in that field for many years, and people would pay to go inside and look around. Lump gave the money to a fund for distressed janitors.

The king’s eldest daughter forgave Perilan his fling with the Witchmaiden since he’d been so helpful getting rid of the dragon’s carcass, though she made him take perfumed baths twice a day for six months. The Witchmaiden herself, once she managed to stop laughing, became a good ally for the kingdom. Perilan’s and Lump’s mother gave away her gold shawl with the diamond fringe because it itched and chose one in nice blue wool. And Lump married the king’s youngest daughter, who admired his new big quarterstaff very much, and lived happily ever after.

Ride Away

...Elizabeth Barrette

That's what the old wizard told them:
Ride away, and don't look back.

He set them down on the green grass
Between the two gray stone gates,
She on her white mare,
He on his bay gelding,
And admonished them not to be afraid.

The high mountain wind whipped at her hair
And snapped her blue dress against her legs,
But the hero only laughed and looked over the edge,
Saying that in *her* world she used to go hang-gliding
And her father was a fighter pilot who flew jets.

The hero smirked and chucked a stone
Down the sheer side of the ridge,
Saying that in *his* world he used to go EVA
And repair star-boats in the black night sky,
So he didn't consider any place to be high up
If he could see ground underneath him.

The wizard grumbled and pushed them apart,
Chivvied each towards a different gate,
And called the crackling magic before them.
World saved! Mission accomplished!
Go HOME, already!

But of course they looked back,
And the wizard swore as the spell went awry,
And they found themselves on an alien plain
(still in their borrowed clothes, on borrowed horses)
With a hundred tentacled horrors converging on them.

*Well, they said to each other,
This ought to be interesting.*

Murphy's Law

...Shana Lear

Once, just once, I wished that everything would go like it was *supposed* to go. I wished the captain would check *what* he had agreed to ship before he signed the shipping order. I wished the first mate would accurately time our departure so that the replacement engine parts would arrive *before* she applied to station control for a priority departure slot. And I sure as hell wish our cook didn't consider *cabbage* to be the most important of the food groups.

But considering we were currently staggering through hyperspace powered by only three fully-functioning engines, with a hold full of Alkan Slime-Beasts, and I had it on good authority that Mato was serving his famous Cabbage Slaw Casserole in the galley tonight, it seemed obvious that wishing was futile. Instead, I gave the number four engine another good whack with my wrench, jarring something back into place so the lights on the control board switched from red to green. Well, mostly green. I can't fix everything by hitting it.

The Assistant Engineer, Ru, gave me a thumbs-up from the control room. I smiled at her as I opened the heavy door from the engine compartment to the control room.

"Fantastic technique," Ru remarked dryly, "very direct."

"I can't find what's loose in that machine; the diagnostic unit tells me that the engine is perfectly fine even as the controls show red across the board. My wrench finds and fixes the problem. And," I added thoughtfully, "It makes me feel better to beat on that hunk of junk sometimes too."

Ru carefully did not grin. The inhabitants of the planet Rozen have three sets of razor-sharp teeth that make any Terran think uncomfortably of a shark whenever they open their mouths too far. Rozen tradition says that the first Terran exploratory team to run across a Rozen colony fled in terror when the inhabitants tried to mimic the newcomer's friendly smiles. I believe it.

Satisfied that the engine would hold for a while I turned to the next item on my mental list. I was only halfway through my inventory of capacitor parts when the next crisis hit. If there is some sort of god or cosmic spirit out there, it no doubt finds my life absolutely hilarious.

"Tayce!" a panicked voice suddenly yelled my name through the com panel before continuing, "Oh lords and spirits, what are they doing now?"

There were only twenty-five crew members on the *Miranda* and Kai and I had served together for over four years now, certainly long enough for me to recognize his voice. Our chief cargo handler was an easygoing Rozen male and certainly not prone to panic, so his frantic tone could only mean one thing.

"Kai," I hit the reply toggle a little harder than necessary and the panel creaked in protest. I ignored it. "Did the slugs get out *again*?"

Alkan Slime-Beasts are one of the most prized culinary delicacies in the Empire. They, through some thoroughly unlikely internal process, create and secrete Acetic Acid. This means that they essentially marinate themselves for their entire lifespan; the resulting meat is the tenderest in the known galaxy. It also means that any ship carrying them needs extensive retrofitting at the end of the run. We found Slime-Beasts roaming the halls only two weeks after we loaded them at Levenworth Station; they had rusted a hole right through the cargo hold wall.

"No, worse!" I personally couldn't imagine what could be worse than slipping around trying to clean up corrosive acid glop, and winced at the memory. "Tayce," Kai continued, oblivious to my mental wanderings, "there's too many of them!"

Arriving in Cargo Hold Six I found Kai up on the catwalk that hung suspended over the makeshift plastic pen we had constructed after the first jailbreak. Four of his six limbs clung to the metal, a fifth clutched a cargo manifest while the last waved about in the air as he tried to count the brown-grey slugs below him. I paused a moment more to admire his acrobatics as he swung about, before banging on the hatch to get his attention.

"Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen...no, eighteen," his count turned into a snarl of Rozen profanity that I was glad I couldn't understand. Still muttering he twisted to look at me, waving the manifest wildly. "We loaded twelve adult Alkan Slime-Beasts on Capra, fourteen-year-old prime stock, not a one less than thirty kilos — now look!"

From my vantage point near the hatch I could see at least fifteen slugs of various weights, and Kai could obviously see more from his elevated position.

"The shipping instructions have all sorts of advice on how to avoid losing one in transit, nothing about preventing yourself from gaining another half-dozen!" Kai glared down at the slugs. They seemed completely indifferent to his quandary.

I looked at him, and then at the slugs, then back as I tried to think of something comforting to say. Fortunately I was saved from having to display my absolute dearth of knowledge of Slime-Beast related platitudes by the arrival of Kai's cargo apprentice.

"I think they reproduced, sir," he said from the hatchway behind me. A blanket of shocked silence descended on the hold, broken only by the young apprentice as he continued, "they reproduce asexually, one of them can literally split into two, or even three genetic clones if the conditions are right." He hugged the data board, from which he had obviously gained this information, to his skinny chest. "We must have somehow stimulated them to multiply."

"How?" I demanded.

"Temperature maybe," Kai mused, "or even all the plastic sheeting."

I was having a conversation about slug sex; the world was officially going to end.

Then the deck under me shivered and the engine whine, usually barely audible through all the hull plating, squealed into the supersonic. The whole ship bucked wildly, shifting and shaking uncontrollably. My last thought before my head collided with the bulkhead was of how ironic it was that the world really *was* ending.

My first thought on waking was similarly inane. "Those slugs better not have gotten out again!" I declared.

"I believe Mr. Kai is taking care of that right now," came an amused voice from my left. I tried to turn my head to reply, but stopped when irritated nerves shrieked in protest. *Okay, I can just lay still for a little longer*, I thought. Then there was a hiss and I relaxed and sighed as the painkiller did its work.

"Will you marry me?" I asked the Kriss at my bedside.

Doctor Hedy Mansi grinned at me, Kriss not having such intimidating dental equipment as Rozen, and replied. "My mate has never seemed open to the idea of sharing, but you may ask her if you wish." Doctor Mansi and his mate, Doctor Kala were part of the numerous Hedy clan on board, and their pair-bond was the reason we got not one but two highly qualified doctors for the *Miranda*.

"Enough chatter," came the voice of said mate, who fixed a gimlet eye on me as she approached, "we have others who need beds, and the Captain wants you back in engineering."

I saluted cheekily and swung myself off the small berth. As I made my way out of the medical bay I saw that most of the crew were there as well. The lone medical apprentice was applying bandages and salves, but the worst injuries seemed to be a couple of broken limbs. I hoped the damage to Engineering was as light.

Naturally, however, the engine bay was a wreck. Some sort of explosion had breached the hull, leaving the bay open to the void, lit only by the occasional emergency light. There was no debris; the vacuum of space had claimed anything not bolted down, so it was easy to figure out what had happened. The #4 engine I had been whacking earlier had held, but there was nothing left of the #2 engine but blackened deck plating and a couple of twisted metal scraps still bolted to it.

The loss of one engine wasn't truly crippling, we had been lumbering along without #4 before I had beaten it into submission. The gaping wound in the hull was jagged, but could be patched. The problem was that the #1 and #2 engines had shared an alcove, so when #2 blew the resulting explosion had fused #1 into what looked like a statue of a Kandarian dancing girl — with twenty-seven legs. Art aside, there was no way we would be able to power a transition into hyperspace with only two functioning engines, if we had even that. We were stuck here, wherever here was.

“Get the repair-bots moving, we have to patch that hole and re-air the bay before the cold does any more damage,” I said, finally, knowing Ru was standing behind me. She nodded and headed off as I surveyed my remaining crew. One of the two engineering apprentices was missing, but I had seen him as I left the medical bay so I knew he was all right. The other apprentice had reported in, and I sent her off to check on the breakers, which must have flipped when the engine exploded and were hopefully the only reason that #3 and #4 had shut down. With my track record for hopes and wishes, I wasn’t holding my breath.

I was missing my mechanic though. I went to find Ru, who was thankfully already in the control room directing the repair-bots toward the hull breach.

“Ru, can you get Jiro and go check on the capacitor banks? I’ll take over here.”

She looked relieved to give up the difficult job of running the remote repair-robots and moved towards the door. “The mechanic?” she asked, hesitating at the threshold.

“Yeah,” I said absently, already involved with the repair-bots, “the one with black hair.”

She nodded and left. She and Jiro would check on the two capacitor banks that were the only energy source on the ship until I got the engines running again. I wanted to know how much time I had.

“Sir, the #1 and #2 engines are completely scrapped, and their capacitor bank shows only twenty percent charged.” I stared right into Captain Delaney’s eyes as I made my report. He blinked, looking confused by the situation. Of course, that was how he normally looked so it was hard to tell. I appreciated his calm demeanor, whatever the reason, especially since his daughter was the next to react.

“So what are we going to do?” First Mate Delaney’s voice was shrill, panic barely hidden in her tone, “just sit here until we run out of air and die?”

I repressed the urge to sigh. There really wasn’t any good way to give this news and the First Mate was not helping matters. Not that she ever did.

“The #3 engine is working fine — we’ve patched the breach and re-aired the bay — and the capacitors for #3 and #4 are one hundred percent charged. Engine #4 is offline, but it may be something we can fix here,” I looked at the Captain, “I wouldn’t count on it though.”

“What can we do then?” a communications tech asked.

“One engine will get us moving in normal space, and the maneuvering thrusters are still working perfectly, so we can navigate. At this time we need to find a station and put in for repairs.”

Everyone at the table turned to look at Hedy Kehinde, the Scans Technician. The normal healthy lavender shade of its skin went pale. Like most Kriss neuters it was highly intelligent and competent, but also terminally shy.

“Em.” Kehinde’s triple-jointed fingers drummed a nervous staccato on the table. “I’ve done sensor sweeps of the area and we are in a star system — but not one that matches anything in the database.”

So there was good news and bad. At least we were in a star system, which carried the possibility of civilization and resources, as opposed to one of the great empty spaces between stars. However, if the star system in which we had arrived wasn't online in the database it was entirely possible we were the first people to ever come here.

"The scans also show no signs of settlement on any of the three solid planets; no space stations either," Kehinde continued quietly.

Chaos erupted in the conference room. Several people jumped to their feet, yelling at Captain Delaney, at Kehinde, at me, demanding that we *do* something. At least I think that's what they were saying, it was hard to tell over the general din. A couple of them were even shouting at the slugs oozing around under the table. The slugs, wisely, ignored them. The Captain was attempting to calm the furor, saying that we had power and plenty of supplies. Mato was declaring that he could feed all of us for a year with the stores of cabbage he had procured at Levenworth Station.

That last statement snapped me out of my daze; he had time to obtain *cabbage* and I couldn't get *engine parts*?

"Kehinde, reconfigure your scans to look for metal deposits," I barked, quieting the room immediately. "We may be the first people in this system, or we may not. You didn't find any stations or towns, but there might be a derelict ship, satellite, or even an asteroid miner out there that we can strip for parts." I turned to the Captain. "It's our best chance."

He looked confused, blinked a couple of times, and then nodded. Kehinde scurried out of the room.

"And I will see about getting that #4 engine up and running," I promised, with a steely look in my eyes that boded ill for any machine stupid enough to annoy me.

Six hours later I was back in the same conference room, but this time I was covered in engine grease and soot. The smell of burnt hair filled the room, courtesy of a shower of sparks from my welding torch; Ru assured me that the Rozen actually found the odor quite pleasant. First Mate Mayla Delaney, however, was looking a little green. I found that funny, since *she* was the one who had demanded my presence without giving me time to clean up.

I was seriously considering the possibility of showing up to every one of her 'urgent' meetings covered in some hideously aromatic sludge when she spoke.

"Chief Kimball," she began, "what is the current status in Engineering?"

A whole lot further if you wouldn't keep dragging me up here, ferret-face, almost slipped out, but I managed a more neutral, "we're going as fast as we can under the circumstances." After all, it wasn't her fault that her genes had gifted her with a face only a rodent could love.

"Have you gotten engine #4 up yet?" she pressed.

"Yes, but with the jury-rig job we had to do on it, I think it dangerous to run at more than fifty percent output for long periods of time," I said.

The First Mate looked like she was about to object when her father broke in, “at this point I think safety is more important than speed,” he paused, “an extra fifty percent out of a single engine won’t do much good anyway.”

Captain Delaney was usually content to sit back and let his daughter run the ship, but despite his baby-faced features and perpetual aura of confusion, Leland Delaney was no fool. Usually. Except when agreeing to haul Alkan Slime-Beasts, but that was a different story. The tension in the room ratcheted down several notches as he calmly took control of the meeting, deftly moving past the rest of the standard reports to address the reason for the meeting in the first place.

“Kehinde, tell us about the metal deposits you found,” he prompted.

Kehinde shuffled the data boards in front of it briefly. “The first two are located in the asteroid belt between the sixth and seventh planets,” it began quietly, plugging in one of the data boards to show a map of the system on the main screen — single sun, eleven planets. “These read as natural metal deposits, probably unworked ore. Since we don’t have the tools to fabricate engine parts on board,” it shot me a quick look and I nodded, “I have concentrated my attention on the second planet. The two innermost planets are not terraformed, but scans indicate that they are habitable, if perhaps unpleasant. There is a large metal signature here,” Kehinde had switched data boards and now indicated an area on the larger image of the second planet, “and a smaller one here.” The first site was on a large forested continent, the second on a smaller continent to the west of the first and seemed to alternate between forest and grasslands. The scale was far too large to tell anything else.

“Thank you Kehinde,” the Captain said, “I think we should start with the bigger metallic object on the planet.” He waited for nods all around before continuing. “We’ll lay in a course and—”

There was a sudden racket in the hallway outside, complete with muffled yells and several of the nastier Rozen expletives. Deprived of her chance to wallow in bureaucratic minutiae, Mayla stormed over to the hatch, clearly bent on releasing some of her ire on the unfortunates outside.

The door slid open before she could get there, however, revealing Kai standing in the corridor with an Alkan Slime-Beast under each of his four arms.

“Sorry sirs!” He aborted an attempt to salute, trying to keep the slugs securely in his grasp, “just retrieving the cargo.”

Mayla stood there gaping at him and the Captain seemed to have turned to stone in shock. Figuring the meeting was over anyway I stood and crossed the room to the hatch.

“Kai, you go ahead and stow these in the hold, I’ll call someone to clean up the decks,” I said, and he grinned, obviously forgetting how intimidating his smile was, and trotted off. I turned back to the officers. “Careful where you step!”

It took us another twenty-six hours to reach the planet, during which time I was able to get a shower, a meal and a solid ten hours of sleep. It took another five hours to establish an orbit, but that was fine as well. I got the last repairs in place in

Engineering, a nice nap and some lunch. Thus, it was that I was sitting in the galley munching unenthusiastically on a cabbage roll when Mayla's voice came over the intercom, calling for the landing party to gather their equipment and assemble at the #2 shuttle.

I would really have preferred to land the entire ship, both for safety, and, hopefully, to ease the transfer of engines from a derelict to the *Miranda*, but atmospheric braking with one and a half engines was tricky at best and suicide at worst. My next proposal was to take a shuttle down to the surface to retrieve any engines or parts I could find. That idea had been rejected by our courageous First Mate who refused to 'risk' her Chief Engineer.

So the shuttle would go down to the planet carrying a crew of mostly Rozen, which made sense. The tiny, chitinous scales that made up their skin were impervious to most anything, the intensive filtration system in their lungs rendered them virtually immune to airborne pathogens and, of course, there is the fact that no one wants to mess with anything with as many teeth as a Rozen. When exploring an unknown and probably hostile environment they were our best bet.

The problem with this idea was that we only had one Rozen engineer. Ru was very competent, but her Rozen companions were our ship guards, who spent most of the time ensuring the security of our cargo. They were nice boys, but they couldn't tell a hammer from a screwdriver. So Mayla had relented enough to allow Ru to take our mechanic, Jiro, along to assist with any engine retrieval necessary.

Another announcement came over the intercom, paging all senior officers. Thankful for the excuse, I pushed away the remainder of my Spinach-Cabbage Casserole and headed for the bridge.

Normally I avoided the bridge as much as possible; Mayla's officious manner could make my hair stand on end. But the shuttle would send its information feed right to the large screen at the communications station, so if I wanted visual I had to brave the first officer. I hoped it would be worth it.

Almost all of the senior officers were gathered around the screen when I arrived; it looked like the visual had just begun. Since I could see all three Rozen I assumed Jiro was holding the recorder. From the looks of it, the shuttle had created its own landing space; the vegetation on every side was singed from engine exhaust.

"Are you sure this is the place?" A voice sounded from a nearby speaker; since I didn't recognize it I assumed it was Jiro speaking.

"Scans indicate a metallic mass thirty-six yards from your position at two o'clock from your present orientation," Kehinde answered immediately. Its long fingers flew over the panel before continuing, "perhaps you could move the Remote Sensing Unit in that direction?"

The RSU was a bundle of incredibly powerful sensors and receptors roughly the size of my hand. I could see that someone down there was already using it, since one of the screens was scrolling information at a prodigious rate. I tried to pick out some of the details — oxygen levels optimal, carbon dioxide levels tolerable, temperature 21°C — but had to stop when my head began to spin. Meanwhile I had missed some communication, because the screen now showed a much closer view of the two Rozen guards as they tried to clear a path with the Rozen analog to a machete.

The visual followed them as they created a tunnel through the vegetation, swiveling every once in a while to show Ru with the RSU. There was a spate of conversation about the utter tenacity and incredible abundance of plant life on the planet. There wasn't much to see though, so several members of the bridge crew drifted back to their own stations. A great clang, loud even over the com link, brought everyone back.

"Captain, I think this is it," Ru said, as she stepped forward into view, "it matches the data from Kehinde's scans." She nodded at the two younger Rozen, who promptly began whacking away at the seeming wall of flora with enthusiasm.

We all watched, nervous, but trying not to show it. If we were lucky that 'metallic mass' would be a derelict spaceship, equipped with fully functioning engines I could simply drop into my bay and use to hyper back to civilization. However, since I had shared the showers with a herd of slugs this morning, my confidence in this fortunate chain of events occurring was understandably low. All I really wanted at this point were some parts to work with. If I could get just one more engine working we would probably be able to make the transition to hyperspace.

"It is a ship," Ru's voice sounded tinny through the speakers, but everyone on the bridge let out the breath they had been holding and smiled, "the RSU matches the hull alloy to a Genesis-class colony transport ship — I'll try to find the identity code."

I knew immediately that this ship was far too old to be useful. Galactic law required every ship to carry a unique ident code, but manufacturers had only been microprinting the bar code into every square centimeter of the hull during fabrication for the last one hundred and fifty years. The landing party had already scraped enough hull plating clean that she should have been able to find the code.

"Genesis-class ships were used for colonization right at the advent of the hyperdrive," I said, reading a section of text from one of the screens, "the manufacturer stopped making them five hundred years ago."

There was a moment of despairing silence on the bridge. That was when Jiro began to scream.

I didn't find out what happened until it was over. Apparently their thick skin had protected the Rozen from the virulent poison exuded by the vine they had been clearing. They had been taking samples of various plants as they went along, including the vine. Dr. Mansi estimated that the poison entered the bloodstream almost immediately, causing wild muscle contractions and convulsions within seconds. We couldn't ask Jiro. Dr. Mansi and his staff hadn't been able to stabilize him and had put the human into coldsleep, suspended animation, until he could find a cure or a treatment.

The atmosphere on board was subdued; everyone spoke quietly, walked softly and ate their cabbage without the usual jokes and banter. Not only was one of our own injured — dying — but Ru had found the ident code mere seconds before Jiro cried out. The *Freedom* was five hundred and seventy one years old. Even if her engines

hadn't become rusted hulks from hundreds of years of exposure, their design was simply too old to integrate into our ship.

So now we were moving the *Miranda* to allow the shuttle to get to the second metal reading Kehinde had found, and I was sitting in the medical bay holding Jiro's cold hand.

Jiro Tan had come on board at Mars Station only five months ago, when we began this ill-fated trip. It grieved me to say that he was a mechanic in my crew, in my department, and all I knew about him was that he had a wide, attractive smile, and a seemingly unending supply of very bad jokes. Hell, I'd promised his mother to take care of him, and here I was five months later referring to him as 'the one with black hair' for want of a better understanding of his character. I buried my head in my hands and tried very hard not to cry.

There was a noise from the door, a metallic sound halfway between a rattle and a slither. I looked up and gaped a moment before gesturing Ru into the room. The Rozen were a sleek and deadly-looking species, very similar to the mythical Terran dragons in form, unless they were upset. Ru had puffed herself up and every scale stood on end, making her look like an enormous pincushion.

"I forget sometimes," her voice broke the crystalline silence, "that humans are so delicate."

"We can be," I answered.

She shook herself violently, causing her scales to rattle again, before sinking to the floor by my chair. She took a moment to arrange herself, tucking legs and mid-limbs under her body.

"The scans did not indicate any threats as we landed; I could not sense any once we were there..." she trailed off. "I did not think to test the plants for toxins."

Ru had never landed on an unexplored planet before — none of us had. Survival training was not a skill this job required. The scans had told her that the planet was safe. Her own instincts had told her that the air was breathable and no large predators were waiting. It was safe.

And it *should* have been. Virulently poisonous plants, hull breaches, malfunctioning engines... This was a *cargo* transport, not some sort of space scout out for adventure! I could feel the grief in me turn to anger.

"Life isn't fair Ru, and it will keep kicking your legs out from under you when you least expect it."

Ru stared at me, alarmed I think, by the viciousness of my tone. I grinned at her. "So we just have to keep on getting back *up*!"

"Tayce."

I took my wrench from the tool belt at my waist and hefted it thoughtfully, still grinning at Ru. "Time to get moving."

Kai had finally given up on keeping the Slime-Beasts corralled — I could see at least three of them in the shuttle from where I sat. They couldn't eat their way through the ceramic alloy of the hull, but the cargo bay walls were beginning to

resemble Swiss Cheese. I could care less. Right now I was burning through the planet's upper atmosphere on my way to what I had to believe was a more recent wreck than the last. Kehinde had warned me, as I stood in the middle of the bridge with my wrench in my hand, demanding to be in the next shuttle down, that the scans couldn't confirm it was a ship. I didn't care. Life had kicked me good and I was ready to kick back.

"We're coming up on it now." Kai's voice was calm. "We'll be able to see it right about..." if he finished his sentence, no one could hear it as whoops of joy filled the cabin.

It was definitely a ship. It had crashed nose first, plowing a furrow across the ground behind it. But, even better, it looked like the engines had still been running when it hit the ground; the area around it was blackened for kilometers. I muttered a brief prayer for the poor souls who had crewed the ship. If they had hit the ground while still under power there was no way anyone could have survived the impact.

Kai circled the wreck several times before choosing a spot to land the shuttle, letting the sensors get a good look at the site. I heard Kehinde's voice through the com briefly, as it told Kai to go ahead and land. I wasn't paying much attention though; I was staring at the wreck greedily. It was too deformed by the crash to identify, but it certainly couldn't be as old as the previous ship. Although the plant life had begun to encroach on the edges of the burned area, the center was clear for several hundred meters.

"I'm going to set down to the east of the wreck," Kai said, interrupting my thoughts, "Kehinde says that it's getting some sporadic heat readings from those mounds to the west that might be animals."

I nodded, and the three Rozen along this time tightened their grips on the high-powered rifles they carried. If the *plants* were this bad I was willing to bet the animals weren't cute, fuzzy, and harmless. I patted the Slime-Beast that had taken up residence under my chair absently, wincing as my fingers began to burn.

"I'll put the shuttle between us and the forest," Kai indicated a smallish stand of trees near the edge of the burn. "Doctor Mansi, please stay in the shuttle unless you are needed, I will have the guards stay with you." If the younger Rozen were disappointed with simply guarding the shuttle they wisely held their tongues.

Mansi nodded. He had come along as a medic, and would stay put unless there was an emergency. His wife was watching over Jiro in the medical bay.

Kai gave the engines one last burn to char any nearby vegetation before landing neatly.

I was chortling slightly as a squeezed myself through the buckled hatches and twisted corridors. The RSU I carried had immediately found the ident code on this ship. She was a Runabout-class cruiser, the *Murphy's Law*, registered one hundred and fifty six years ago out of Aredah Station. She had been reported missing less than a hundred years ago.

That meant that if there was anything left of the engines, I could use it. I grinned and chortled again, ignoring Kai's strange looks. Not only would the engines be fairly compatible, but, if we were really lucky, *Murphy's Law* might have been retrofitted as a pirate, and the engines would be even newer and more powerful. It was a distinct possibility, after all. The Runabout class had been designed as a light cargo hauler, built for speed to carry small but valuable loads. It was ridiculously easy to convert into a pirate vessel.

I was humming by the time we made it to the engine bay. There were two intact engines and three more that could be used for parts. I was happily unbolting the first one from the deck when Kai's communicator sparked to life.

"Kai, those heat sources that Kehinde thought might be animals — they're getting closer." Mansi's voice held no trace of panic but we could tell he was tense.

"How much closer? And how many?" Kai asked. I got back to the bolts. We might have to leave in a hurry.

"Hundreds of them, closing in on the derelict from the west, they aren't too far away but..."

We never got to hear what he said next because of the sudden roar from outside. It sounded like nothing I had ever heard before — but whatever was making it was clearly angry. Kai reached down and grabbed me, hauling me bodily away from the engine I was determined to bring with me.

"Later," he hissed, propelling me back through the shattered corridors. Even I knew better to argue with that tone.

Once outside he grabbed me again, this time throwing me across his back and racing for the shuttle. Rozen usually walk quadrapedally, using their legs and mid-limbs, which leaves their arms free. Kai was racing over the charred landscape on all six limbs, covering ground at a tremendous rate. I just hung on desperately.

Once we were in the shuttle I fell from Kai's back, hugging the nice solid deck for a moment before standing. Rozen might be fast on six legs, but I don't think that riding what felt like a galloping caterpillar will ever catch on.

Meanwhile the noise from outside was now loud enough — or close enough — for us to hear even through the shuttle's walls. Kai checked the hatch to make sure it was securely closed and locked. A moment later we all jumped when there was a great metal clang, followed by another, then a hundred.

"They're throwing spears at the shuttle," Mansi's voice was filled with disbelief.

"I thought they were animals?" Kai asked, stalking forward to peer at Mansi's screen.

"Oh no," Mansi replied, "not animals," transferring the image from the shuttle's exterior camera to the main screen.

I stared at the screen in shock. One of my crew was up there, running out of time. Jiro could only stay sedated for a maximum of seventy two hours before we had to revive him. Time was running out and the engines I needed were *right there*, less than

three hundred meters away — and between them and me stood hundreds of fur-clad barbarians yelling and throwing *spears*!

“I guess we aren’t the first people here after all,” Mansi said quietly.

There were a couple more clangs as spears bounced off the shuttle’s hull. My right hand twitched toward the wrench at my waist and I began to laugh.

“Toxic plants, exploding engines, slugs in my shower and now enraged natives to top it off!” I sat down, laughing so hard I was crying, or perhaps crying so hard I was laughing.

“Tayce?” Kai asked cautiously.

I spun to face him, all laughter gone. My eyes were cold and Kai actually stepped back a pace. Everyone has a breaking point, a place and time when they have had enough of whatever life was dealing out. I had just reached mine.

“I am going to get those engines, slap them into the *Miranda* and get us the hell out of here — and if a hundred, or two hundred screaming savages think they can stop me they have another thing coming!”

Taking advantage of their shock I toggled the hatch open and marched through. Kai lunged forward, but he was too late. I was outside, wrench in hand, before he could stop me. The herd of people outside turned to stare at me with murder in their eyes, and I didn’t care. I had eaten casseroles more dangerous than them.

“I am going to that ship,” I said, clearly and slowly, pointing at the twisted metal carcass behind the menacing crowd. “I am going to unbuckle two engines from the decking and take them back to my ship.” I fixed them with a deadly glare. “And you are all going to *get out of my way!*”

A large man with a decorated staff pushed forward to stand in front of me. Since barbarians always seem to regard long sticks as conferring some sort of authority, I guessed he was their leader.

“We will not allow infidels to profane the holy Murfle-Luu!” he screeched, waving his staff in my direction. “The unclean cannot be allowed into his presence!”

I almost dropped my wrench, and the Rozen, who had moved to flank me when I had rushed from the shuttle, gaped in shock. This had the fortuitous effect of moving the threatening crowd back a ways, since it displayed all of their teeth quite nicely.

“That spaceship is your god?” I asked incredulously.

The dialect he was speaking was hard to understand. I watched the man, clearly a shaman or priest, draw himself up as the others around him nodded.

“Many generations ago, when the all-mighty goddess Freet gave this land to the first of the People, it was rich and full of goodness!” His voice was shrill enough to give Mayla a good run for her money and I winced a little. The other barbarians, however, seemed enraptured, so maybe it was just me.

“And Freet loved the People and gave them all good things,” here his voice dropped slightly, for which I was grateful, “but the People sinned greatly, and none of the People’s offerings pleased her. She cursed the People and their world turned against them!” There was a low wail from the audience. “Many died.”

He continued, but I was no longer listening. Gesturing to Kai, I edged toward the shuttle slightly. The Shaman was so busy describing the hardships and terrors that had assaulted the People after Freet’s departure that none of them noticed.

"They're the colonists!" I hissed at my companions. "The ones from that first ship we found, the *Freedom*. They've turned history into mythology; the *Freedom* became the goddess Freet, and now..."

"This ship then, the *Murphy's Law* has become Murfle-Luu, another god," Kai finished for me.

The Shaman must have heard that, because he abruptly surged closer to us. "Do not blasphemy the god's name with your demon's tongues! Heretics!" He half-turned back to his followers. "For though Freet is in all ways our mother, who brought the People to this land, Murfle-Luu is our father, who saved us when we would have perished!"

There was sudden picket of spears facing me. "For though Freet had turned her back on the People, the holy Murple-Luu had pity, and descended unto us, burning away the poisonous forests with his sacred fire." The Shaman gathered himself up. "We will not betray his mercy by allowing demons to profane him!"

The Colonial Service Agency offered rewards to any ship who reported finding a planet like this, where something had gone horribly wrong and the survivors reverted to barbacy to survive. As soon as we got back to civilization and sent in the coordinates a virtual swarm of personal would descend on the People: computer techs to analyze what was left of the *Freedom's* computers, anthropologists to study the culture, psychologists to study the people, and 'recovery personnel' to put them back on the road to civilization.

None of that would happen, however, until I got those engines. What could and would happen, however, was that Jiro would die. He could die slowly, stuck in coldsleep for too long, the brain slowing down until it just stopped altogether. Or he could die quickly, if we woke him up without a cure, convulsing until his heart burst. And right now I was standing here, wasting the hours he had left.

"I said, get out of my way!" I roared, and threw my wrench straight at the Shaman's head.

There was a sharp crack and then silence; a horrible, deafening silence. The Shaman knelt slowly and picked up the pieces of his staff and cradled them to his chest. My guards raised their rifles and bared their teeth as the crowd took a step towards me, terrible growls filling the air. I almost laughed. It might have been better if my aim *wasn't* so lousy and I *had* hit the man instead of the stick.

A shout of panic from the far side of the crowd probably saved my life. The whole group turned abruptly, staring at the trees behind our shuttle. There was something moving there, and the native's reactions confirmed my guess that the fauna of this planet was probably even worse than the flora.

"The trees are moving!" Kai said.

I craned my head trying to get a better view, strange thoughts of carnivorous trees flashing through my mind. And indeed, the trees were moving — in fact they were falling, and disappearing. I couldn't believe it!

"It's the slugs!" I turned towards Kai. "They must have gotten bored of snacking on the shuttle and moved out here." Even as I said it I could see another one slithering down the boarding ramp to join the half dozen or so in the trees. Considering Kai's last count had indicated that we now had something like thirty of them on board, I wasn't surprised.

Alkan Slime-Beasts did in fact have mouths; they just didn't have to use them very often, preferring to simply digest their surroundings externally before absorbing nutrients. Apparently the trees here were tasty enough to warrant a more direct mode of eating, and I could see that all of them seemed happily bent on deforestation.

The natives were staring at the slugs in awe, some speaking to each other so quickly that I couldn't catch what they were saying, others falling to the ground.

Inspiration struck. "Fools!" I cried out. "You see the powers of the divine beasts of the holy Murfle-Luu and you cry blasphemy?" The natives stared at me with rapt attention. My shipmates looked at me like I had lost my mind. "His holiness Murfle-Luu sent his cleaning fire that the People might live. But now the deadly trees encroach on the People again!"

I swept my hand toward the trees, which were still rapidly disappearing. Our scans had indicated that the plants were so moisture-rich that any fire these people could set would probably go out before making much of a dent. The incredibly hot fire from the crash had given the People some reprieve, but that had been a hundred years ago. The men watching now had probably never seen the trees disappear so quickly and easily.

"He has seen your suffering and sends his gifts." I looked at them disapprovingly. "Yet you greet them with spears!"

There was a great clatter as every warrior threw down his spear and fell to his knees before me. I walked over to the Shaman and retrieved my wrench.

"Shall he retract his favors?" I asked quietly, "or will you treat them with the reverence they deserve?"

"Our error, our sin! May holy Murfle-Luu forgive us!" The Shaman wailed desperately.

"His holiness is all forgiveness and mercies," I intoned, "treat his gifts with respect."

When I left two hours later, *with* my engines, the crowd of people gathered around the Slime-Beasts had grown to include women and children, all staring reverently at the slugs. They cheered briefly as the shuttle took off before turning back to their adoration of their newest gods. I am fairly sure the Slime-Beasts didn't care, but they did seem to be enjoying eating trees, so in the end it didn't matter. The People were happy, the slugs were happy, and if I couldn't get the ship into hyperspace in six hours I'd eat my wrench!

It would probably taste better than cabbage anyway.

I didn't have to eat my wrench, as the engine replacement went without a hitch. This was especially fortunate, since I was elected to help Kai herd all fifty-six Slime-Beasts

off the ship in Bluethorne City and my wrench made an excellent sort of slug-prodding device. The price that Captain Delaney got for such a windfall of slugs was enough to fix the ship, buy a host of nice spare parts for engineering, and pay for Jiro's medical bills at Bluethorne City's central hospital. Jiro was, thankfully, on a quick road to recovery once Dr. Mansi got him out of *Miranda's* tiny med-bay and into a real hospital. A ship *with* engines, *without* holes, and a whole and healthy crew. I looked down at my plate full of Mato's extra-special roast cabbage-slaw casserole and smiled.



Bitter Elsie Mae

...Tessa Kum

Here I am, a poor seaman down on his luck, won't you spot me a bit of grub? What? Here now, you watch your words, laddie. There weren't no wine and women what took me money, oh no, it's a strange tale what brought me here.

There's never been a ship's soul go so bad as with the *Elsie Mae*. It's no mercy that she spared me; she wants her story tol', and there be naught for me to do but that.

I can only pray she went down with the *Bitter*. For if that didn't kill her, nothing will.

That slut Margie down the ol' Happy Goat on Portsmouth done a 'Hi, Jack!' on me. Up goes her skirts and down comes the cosh. Daft floozy weren't even that much a looker.

They didn't need to get the press-gang on me. I were looking for a ship that day. Could of just asked me. But I put me mark in the *Bitter's* book and as I had plenty of ships 'fore her, they gone made me carpenter's mate.

I were walking to the doc's cabin 'cause that damn pig with the cosh weren't too careful of where he were hitting, and that were when it first happened. The whole place smelt like polish and there were new paint everywhere, but it all felt real familiar like. It's what them frogs call 'day-jar-voo.'

They said, "What's wrong, Potsworth?" and I tol' them. *Bitter* were a new ship, as they say, stinks of gum and varnish still. Not seen her on the waters 'fore. They gone given me funny looks then, and one dirty bastard made off the evil eye, as like the whole bunch of them were scared. I tol' them to clear off 'fore I belt them one, and not a man among them had the balls to stay.

I thought it were just the crack on me noggin making me see things. Weren't till I stood on deck as I knew the truth of it.

New sails and ropes and paint and name and she were still the *Elsie Mae*. So's I thought. There's grooves on the fife rail where the ropes have worn in, even though they gone changed the turns taken, and these three knots in the deck planking right here what looks like a beetle, and here's the biggest give away of all, on the course faddock, right on the edge, the letters HSP. That there's me. Henry Sounding Potsworth. Know her roll on the waves like me very own heartbeat.

But this didn't seem right, for the *Elsie Mae* were Captain Wartely's ship, and not just his ship if you get me. He named her after his first gal, and when she died the ship were the only thing kept him going. He loved that ship something fierce, and blow me if she didn't love him back. Some months back I seen him in Ireland, and he were fit and well, and his company sound, and all right with his world. I even heard his wife gone had another babe, a wee gal.

Seems as something must have happened soon after for the *Bitter* to be so quick in serving as licensed privateer, and under a new captain too. Ain't no way Captain Wartely would of sold the *Elsie Mae*. A right shame, as he were a good man. This one here, Captain Farnelby, he's a right toff. Big ol' chip on his shoulder about something and we won't be seeing him tying down in rough seas. Too genteel.

I tried asking where the ship come from and naught know. Them's that does have mouths tighter than their arses. Never seen a prissier pack of officers in all me life.

They beat a man for he weren't quick enough up the rigging. Keeping me eyes down for this lot.

Mousey Brown were a bastard of a man, a pig dog and a pox-faced dullard. But he didn't deserve it. Whatever it were.

He were sent up to the topgallant during the night to tie the gaskets and he never come down. Officer of the watch changed, and they must have forgot him, 'cause his missing weren't noticed till dawn.

It weren't that he were gone that raised the cry, were that they saw the topgallant. Ghastly sight, sent chills in me fingers just looking at it. This great splash of blood across the sail, and I thought to meself there aren't that much blood in a man's body. Dark it were, awful dark. Naught of Mousey Brown to be seen, naught at all.

Captain Farnelby were all for sending men straight up, but there weren't anyone wants to go. So's he ordered Philby and Hodgeson and O'Neily up or a flogging, and up they go.

There were something god-awful about that stain. It were huge and black and looking at us all down on deck, I swear. The blood went and run in a ways such as almost makes a face. Didn't want that hanging above me all day.

Them three were out on the yardarm where Mousey Brown were, or should have been, and they called down that there weren't nothing up there but blood soaked in the sail and the ropes and all over the yardarm, still damp, and it got all over their pants.

I turned and tol' Ol' Rotten that weren't right, not only two days from port, and he just muttered at me. Said there were a demon on the ship, and he heard it knocking in the bilges. But Ol' Rotten were a bit gone in the head, and I gone to tell him that when there's this yell and everyone were shoving around and I didn't know what were happening.

Then there were a great crash, no, not crash, were more like a thud, but all meaty and wet.

When I looked, the Captain were all white as a sheet, and Philby and Hodgeson and O'Neily were fallen on the deck right at his feet. O'Neily's skull were all smashed in like a egg, and Philby were all twisted wrong around the back and he weren't

breathing, but Hodgeson were bleeding from the nose and ears and crying like a frightened babe. His legs were broken, both of them, and there were nasty bones poked right through his skin.

He said the footrope snapped but they held on the yardarm, but it didn't matter for the yardarm shook them off.

Captain Farnelby weren't having none of that nonsense, thank you very much, and said that it were the wind or somesuch, but Hodgeson kept on crying.

There were blood all over the deck when they took them away. 'Twere me had to scrub it all, but it wouldn't come out of the wood.

Hodgeson died in the night after the doc cut his legs off.

Bilges always stink on high, but the hold began to put up a right good stench after them three deaths, and it weren't for the bodies neither for we buried them right and quick. Queer, bilges smell all the same like, but this smell weren't that. It hung round the officers' cabins, and me and George sniffed all the corners like, but it weren't coming from anywhere.

Weren't a good smell. I'm used to sweat and blood, but this were worse. Got up your nose and down the back of your throat so's you could taste it even when you're up in the rigging. Brought me guts right up, it did. Were all anger, which don't make any sense, but that's what it tasted like.

Officers weren't happy, and you ain't never seen so many of them on deck, trying to get away from it. They were all strutting around with no idea what's they were doing and getting in everyone's way.

But that weren't so bad as the knocking.

I said it were strange, for the *Elsie Mae* were a quiet ship. She's too well made to be groaning in a brisk wind, and only talks in a wee whisper. And now there were this knock-knocking everywhere you go, like there's some poor bastard in the hull, banging away, and that bastard won't shut up neither. Knocking all hours of the day and night, none of us could sleep, and some of the men, they wouldn't even set foot below. Said it were cursed and we brought ghosts with us. Captain Farnelby had them flogged, said there weren't never any cause for ghosts on this ship.

The knocking were so loud when he said that I near couldn't hear him.

I asked Ol' Rotten how things stood, for he'd sailed with Captain Farnelby for years gone by, but he didn't want to talk about the ship at all. He gots himself all worked up and started yelling and spitting at me about nothing what made any sense to me. How it weren't their fault and he ain't never done no harm to no little gal.

They don't call him Ol' Rotten for nothing.

I were on the heads when I heard First Mate Casey screaming. Were this horrible shriek what no man should ever let out, and it went on and on and on like he were using more air than what he had in him 'cause he needed to or the scream would, I don't know, tear him apart from the insides. It were a good thing I were already on the heads, I tell you that.

By the time I had me trousers up there were men running around all over trying to find the First Mate. They were yelling and shouting and making such a hullahbaloo I don't reckon none of them heard all the crazy knocking that weren't their feet.

I were going along midships when I tripped and went bang right over, and I sure found First Mate Casey.

There were blood everywhere, just like with Mousey Brown, only this time it were I what were in it. Smelled horrid, like a man's insides, but look as I may, I couldn't find nothing of First Mate Casey, only his boots.

Murphey picked one of the boots up and there weren't nothing in it but more blood.

The captain put me in irons. Said I must have done it.

Damn powder monkey dropped me food, and the cell floors weren't none so clean. He just looked down in me bowl and come over all white all a sudden, and threw the bowl like it bit him.

I asked him what he were doing throwing me tucker on the floor, and he just pointed at me food going, "There's the girl! There's the girl!" I had a look, and even being a mess I could kind of see a face. There were these two eyes and a mouth, and they weren't nice them eyes, but the longer I looked, the more there were to see, and 'fore I knew it a whole gal were staring right back at me. Pretty little thing, even in a mess of stew. She looked a bit familiar, like maybe I seen her picture 'fore.

The powder monkey gone run away, but I were chained with that damn knocking going on. I knocked back. Don't know why.

Could hear all this yelling with everyone going on about this gal everywhere. I said to her, "Elsie Mae, where did you go bad?" and all the knocking stopped and the faces went away.

Captain Farnelby didn't like it that I called her *Elsie Mae*. For all his saying what the *Elsie Mae* were gone, and the *Bitter* ain't got naught in common with her, there weren't no stopping what's there. He come over all still when I asked him about Captain Wartely, and the ship went still too. He said he ain't never heard of no Captain Wartely, which I knew were a plum lie.

When I tol' him that I hadn't seen First Mate Casey on the deck for I were on the heads, and it were just like Mousey Brown, he didn't believe me. Wanted himself a scapegoat to feed the others.

And then the ship knocked, right by me ear, and the thought just popped into me head. I asked him if he knew Captain Wartely's daughter Elsie, what the ship were named after. Pretty little gal, she were. Figurehead carved in her likeness. They said she never actually died, she stayed with the ship. Loved her pop that much.

Were talking out me arse, but the captain came over all quiet, and then tol' me I weren't to mention Captain Wartely again, and if I did it were mutiny. That were a bit stiff, but I weren't going to say nothing with the captain in that sort of mood. He gone left in a huff and said I weren't to have no food today.

Only all the food went bad. Every last bit of it, even those damn hardtacks, even the rum. They said if you looked at it right, that gal were there again.

Nothing for it but to put into port and get some more, only we were a ways away from anything. None of us were happy, for rationing is bad enough without your food looking back at you.

No one wanted to be alone on the *Bitter*. Being out of sight were like signing your own death warrant. Too much fear in the crew, and what with the knocking and starving and everyone having the night horrors weren't no one not looking for a fight. George, he come down to visit, he said we had more men down from brawls than from them 'accidents.' We were in bad shape when the Spanish privateer showed on the horizon.

There weren't enough fit to man all the *Bitter's* guns, so's next thing I know they dragged me out and put me as a sixer on the port side. Hadn't ever even done a drill with this lot.

Stood there, ready to haul the cannon into place. Horrible waiting with not being able to see nothing, and the galley were stinking on high with that horrible smell. Everything were sticky with sweat, and we were all fidgeting and I heard most doing a little prayer.

Ol' Rotten weren't praying, nor were he looking through the portholes trying to see the privateer. I were watching him, and he were looking all over the walls and ceiling and floor and guns like he were expecting them to grow arms and get him.

I said he should of made his confessions 'fore getting on this ship, and you ain't never seen a man fall to pieces so fast. He just started sobbing about how he was sorry about Wartely and it weren't his fault, but he didn't have no choice, captain's orders.

First I've heard anyone mention Captain Wartely, and I straight out asked him what they did to him.

Ol' Rotten broke then. Started screaming about hows it were an accident, it were, and it were Farnelby's fault and Farnelby's orders, and he'd gone crossed his heart and said sorry a hundred times, but Farnelby ordered the *Elsie Mae* be requisitioned, and 'fore Captain Wartely could say aye or nay there were blood all over the deck, and Captain Wartely breathed his last, and the ship, she *screamed*, and she knew whats they'd done, and she were going to see the same done to them all.

Everyone gone leaped right out of their skins till a sailor knocked Ol' Rotten down.

That put the chills right in me, that did. No wonder she were so full of anger.

They beat us back to our places and the deck tilted as the *Bitter* come about to give the privateer a full broadside. Watched the starboard gunners fire one by one and the cannons thundered back from the recoil and next I know there were shrapnel and wood gone everywhere, and a big chunk of the hull blasted clear away. The fourth gun went and blew itself up. Splinters got me hard in the leg and shoulder, but I were still standing. Privateer didn't even need to get a shot off at us. The fourth cannon and crew were gone, just gone, with the deck it were on and the deck above. Blood and bits of body about the galley, and I couldn't hear nothing but all this screaming.

I were going to fill a place on the left over starboard guns when the ship lets out this moan. It were a real horrible sound what started at the stern and creaked up to the prow. There were shudders all under foot what have nothing to do with enemy fire. Then another groan, almost like a word, and then the *Bitter* started to list.

I grabbed a hold of the stairs. Through the gunports I could see the privateer coming about with her cannons out, not a trace of smoke around them, and all the dons standing on deck, jeering. The *Bitter* let out another horrible groan and shudder, and then the hole in her hull dipped under the water, and I knew it were more than bad luck.

I got out on top right quick, 'fore the water caught me. Rope and mess everywhere below, and the deck weren't tidy neither, what with the listing. Didn't wait for the captain to give the order to abandon ship, for he couldn't see, no, he wouldn't see what were happening. She were shaking and shuddering like she were trying to tear herself apart. Groaning and creaking like she were trying to speak.

"Elsie Mae!" I cried. "What're you doing?"

There were a movement up by the bowsprit, but there were no one there. I clung on for dear life to the railing, and what I saw turned me hair white, I tell you. The figurehead, all a likeness of Wartley's first daughter, it turned and looked straight at me, God's truth.

The whole ship, she juddered, and I knew then she were going to take everyone to the bottom. But for me, she pointed at one of the lifeboats, and as I watched it swung out over the water with naught anybody touching it. Don't need to tell me twice.

I near fell in the boat with it wobbling about, and as I were cutting the ropes there were a snap and crack like a shout, and the ocean tore as the caulking peeled away and the planks sprang apart, and the water just rushed in. Her sounds were changing. She sounded more and more like she were trying to speak.

I rowed for all I were worth. Making straight for the privateer, so's I were facing the *Bitter*, the *Elsie Mae*. They were trying to lower another boat, but it just falls apart like there were nothing but spit holding it together. She weren't going to let a single one of them go. Everyone were slipping and falling in all the blood what were welling out of the deck. She were going down fast, and there were a great roar as the water finally rushed in the last of her, and in that roar I just heard her cry.

Oh, Elsie Mae.

She plunged down, and the glimpse I got of the figurehead, just 'fore she disappeared for good, were strange and wrong. She weren't the good Elsie Mae no more, not Wartley's sweet gal. A vengeful ship, if ever there were such a thing.

Suction pulled them all down, those that were on deck. I waited, but only wreckage come back up. She took everyone but me.

The don's captain didn't want naught to do with me, so they gone dropped me off first port they passed, right here. Don't even got me any pay. I'm just a poor seaman, down on his luck. Now, I gone tol' you a good tale, a fine tale. How's about that grub?

Fantasy: Imagined Worlds, or Current Social Commentary?

...Tehani Wessely

Tolkien insisted his hobbits were not allegorical. Feist and Eddings both nodded to the fact that their “invented worlds” bear some resemblance to the world we live in. From high fantasy to supernatural romance, societal references are embedded in speculative fiction stories of all forms, perpetuating or challenging cultural standards and stereotypes. So is fantasy merely a representation of reality? Do these worlds, conjured from an author’s imagination, merely reflect the current social trends of the time they were written?

The term “speculative fiction” has been coined in recent years to cover the science fiction (SF), fantasy (F) and horror (H) genres, and all the sub genres that they encompass, such as magic realism, supernatural romance, space opera and so on.¹ The phrase itself implies that this type of fiction is conjectural, theoretical or suppositional.

In regards to SF, the speculative element comes from hypothesizing possible futures, or aspects of futures. When it comes to fantasy, however, it is the “what if” element that dominates; alternate histories, magic realism, “imaginary” worlds that bear strong societal or geographical resemblance to the “real” world we live in. Commentary on world politics, terrorism, war, cultural, racial and gender divides — the subtext is prominent in many fantasy texts.

Fantasy works on a premise of conjecture in which alternative social norms are presented in an imaginary, or at least altered, reality. Whether that be a world where dragons are worshipped as gods, or hobbits quest for a ring, or vampires are accepted members of society, the author is presenting views on culture, society and sometimes geography that parallel, contradict with or conform to those we see as “normal”.

Of course, speculative fiction written by a person in England during World War II will almost certainly present a different view to that written by a person in Iraq in 2007. The descriptions of landscape, ethnicity, world figures and events, whilst “imaginary”, are likely to be analogous with landscapes, ethnicities, world figures and events from that author’s own world at the point in time and space that the author is writing. Sometimes this is deliberate, and the author is making a definitive statement of the state of the world using speculative fiction as a medium. At other times (and as Tolkien insisted), it is simply the subconscious influence on the life and times of the author that are evidenced in what and how he or she writes.

Fiction is a medium for transmitting one person's outlook on life to a number of people who choose to read it. Realist fiction, which supposedly reflects the world at the time and place it was written, often draws dark conclusions about society and can result in tedium or outrage on the part of a reader who does not agree with the author's perspective. Speculative fiction, however, is loved for its sheer entertainment value — the popularity of this genre demonstrates the growing need readers feel for escapism, to flee from the chains of the "real world" that bind them. Interestingly though, the genre also has perhaps the strongest capacity to impart societal truths, but in a way so subtle at times that readers might not be aware of it.

Since words were first used to tell stories, authors and storytellers have used their texts to capture or comment on the world as they see it. The Bible, although perceived as a non-fiction work, could be read as one of the greatest epic stories ever written. Many authors claim their stories are written purely for entertainment. Tolkien, one of the forefathers of modern speculative fiction, stated:

The prime motive was the desire of a tale teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them... As for any other inner meaning or 'message', it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical.²

While Tolkien himself most likely believed what he said, multitudes of commentators on Tolkien and other fantasists would beg to differ. It is almost impossible for a person to write and yet not record some comment about social reality, be it gender, culture, race, religion or any of a society's stereotypes and norms. It may be conscious or unconscious to include such references, but it does occur. Reality, or at least representations of reality as the author perceives it, will be recorded in the writer's work, whether presented intentionally or not.

These representations vary in reader accessibility however, and often the frequent perpetuations of a stereotype will slip by. On the other hand, defiance of an accepted norm will generally not escape notice, and may impinge upon the reader's values, systems of belief, and sheer enjoyment of a story if the "message" against a stereotype is too overt.

To a person who picks up a novel or story as an escape from everyday existence, social commentary within the text may be bypassed or ignored. For example, the presentation of religion in a fantasy novel is often quite complex, and the reader seeking only their pleasure in the book would usually accept the gods, rituals and religious practices of the characters in the text simply as part of the story, which is of course generally just as the author wishes. However, a closer reading of some stories can produce some very surprising comments on different religions of the world, if the reader is conversant in such matters. Jacqueline Carey's *Kushiel's sequence* and the *Jewels* novels by Anne Bishop

immediately spring to mind as examples of Christian religion being viewed in an alternate manner, while it is well known that novels such as the *Narnia* series (C.S. Lewis) and Pullman's *Northern Lights* and the other books in the *His Dark Materials* saga have strong Christian links. Fantasy analyst K. Filmer notes that:

Fiction consists of lies, relying on the convention of a 'suspension of disbelief' for its credibility, no matter how 'realistic' it purports to be. Life is not lived in neat, self encapsulated chapters...there is an argument for classifying all literature as fantasy in one sense or another...³

In the broadest sense, all fiction is fantasy in that it deals with alternate realities. Even the realist novel contains notions of what the author perceives as "real" or "true", but which may be inconceivable to readers in other cultures or in years to come.

Fantasy, though, has the capacity to provide a vehicle by which the author can capture a stereotype and either perpetuate it, or dismiss it at will. The mighty (modern) fantasy tomes of Feist, Eddings, Jordan, Martin, and myriad others have the fullest capacity to achieve this, and close study of these novels demonstrates fascinating dioramas of the present, "real" world, encapsulated in "imaginary" settings. Sometimes these stereotypes are handled most subtly. Others are painted with a broad brush.

Compare for example the handling of Feist's gender roles in his *Midkemia* sequence, as opposed to the way the Eddings writing team deals with women of power. While David and Leigh Eddings include powerful female characters as a matter of course in their work, often these women are overpowering — Polgara has enormous control over the males in the *Belgariad/Mallorean* sequences, and the goddess Aphrael in the *Elenium/Tamuli* trilogies can do pretty much anything. While the desire to present powerful women is obvious, it is so blatant that it can have the effect of being simply a tool. It can even have the reverse effect of *disempowering* women, by creating a composite of stereotypical female characteristics instead of writing characters indicative of *real* women, with real lives and true power, emotionally, mentally and physically.

By contrast, while the women in Feist's novels are not necessarily central characters (with the obvious exception of Mara of the Acoma in the *Empire* trilogy, notably co-written by Janny Wurts), they do have a sustainable and measurable impact on the men in the *Midkemia* world. This is especially evident in the women in the supporting roles in the early novels, *Magician* and the first books following it. Feist presents ordinary women placed in extraordinary circumstances, and demonstrates in a very natural way how these women handle the situations they are thrust into, without being all powerful, all knowing, or somehow possessing of supernatural power — they are simply women, showing that women can be leaders, can grow and change, can become people of presence and power in a world that did not necessarily allow for it. Yes, Feist too has women *with* power, such as Miranda, and the Empress of Kesh, but these women too are allowed to simply be women, and are not just masculine characters made female for the sake of gender

balance.

Gender is not the only stereotype effected or protested in fantasy; race, culture and age are frequent visible themes that authors consciously write into their works, alongside all the unconscious mirroring of the “real”. Fantasy novels, renowned for length and weight, are an obvious vehicle for demonstrating the phenomenon of reality in an imaginative realm, due to the space allowed to expound upon societies and cultures in the stories. At the same time, the short form of this speculative genre also has the capacity to express such trends. One only has to read stories in any of the current crop of ASIM, AGOG, Aurealis, Orb or New Ceres to find threads of the “real” twined with those of the imagined. Perhaps these stories don’t have the scope to express the depth that a novel does, but they are still a record of the time and space they were written.

In his chapter of *Twentieth Century Fantasists*, J. Strugnell suggests that heroic fantasy reflects basic social aspirations and concerns:

[Fantasy stories] reflect the need of the child to overcome the threat of the adult world, they reflect the need of disadvantaged social groups to overcome social barriers, and they reflect the need of suppressed ethnic and racial groups to achieve political independence.⁴

It could also be inferred that fantasy does not just reflect these needs; it is actually a window to the world that the needs come from. Fantasy is current social commentary, whether it intends to be or not; all writing reflects the world the writer inhabits and must by extension capture that world, despite the differences in time and place the writer is showcasing. All writing is representations of reality in some shape or form — fantasy simply has a more enjoyable, more subtle means to express it.

(Endnotes) 1 The SF Site, <http://www.sfsite.com/columns/amy26.htm>, has an interesting column “Science Fictian & Fantasy: A Genre With Many Faces”, by Amy Galdschlager which defines some of the subgenres of speculative fiction. It also has a logical quote from Isaac Asimov regarding what divides science fiction from fantasy.

2 in LatR 1986 ed., p. 10/11

3 Filmer, K., 1992, *Scepticism and Hope in Twentieth Century Fantasy*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Ohio, p. 141

4 Strugnell, J., 1992, ‘Hammering the Demans’, *Twentieth Century Fantasists*, K. Filmer (ed.), The Macmillan Press, Landan, p. 173

Interview Jackie Kessler

...Tehani Wessely

ASIM: I've read and fallen in love with Hell's Belles and The Road to Hell — the idea of a succubus turning human is so much fun. What was your inspiration?

JACKIE: Embarrassing my mother, of course. (Actually, Mom is my biggest fan. Not only does she buy loads of copies of my books and give them to family and friends, she also was in the audience when was part of the erotic reading series In the Flesh. Hi, Mom!)

Jezebel, the former succubus, sort of pulled an Athena and sprang fully formed out of my head. I knew I wanted to write about a demon who left Hell, and because it would be a female demon, that automatically meant (to me, anyway) that she would be a succubus.

When it came to creating Hell for my series, I had a lot of influences, most notably Neil Gaiman. His story arc about Hell got me thinking about what would happen if Hell changed management...and that got me thinking about the purpose of Hell in the first place. And that led to the Announcement, which is the launching point for the action in *Hell's Belles* and completely changes Jezebel's worldview.

ASIM: Jezebel is a funny and sassy heroine, full of delightful flaws, and she's clearly got some soft spots. Was it challenging to write a character like her?

JACKIE: Actually, Jezebel speaks with a voice very similar to mine (except she's funnier). Maybe I'm tapping into my own inner demon, but when I write Jezebel, it just all flows.

Harder for me was writing the third book, *Hotter than Hell* (August 2008 — plug! plug! No, I have no shame), which is the incubus Daunuan's story. Writing in first-person male POV, especially when the narrator is an evil, horny demon who needs to have reader sympathy, really forced me to write outside of my comfort zone. When I finally found Daun's voice, wow, it just soared. And then I had to switch gears and write in Jezebel's voice for a novella (*cough*, to appear in the Kensington anthology, *Eternal Lover*, April 2008, *cough*), and man, that was tough. The first month I tried to write that story, I kept doing it in Daun's voice. It took a while to finally step into Jezebel. Finding the right beginning to the novella helped immensely. Frankly, I think Daun and Jezzie are terribly bemused over the whole thing.

ASIM: You mentioned a novella (sorry, are you a little ill today? Hope that gets better as the plugs become more shameless!) featuring Jezebel. What else do you have in the works?

JACKIE: I'm working on a few more HELL things, including a book trailer for HOT. (Love making book trailers. There must be something very, very wrong with me.) I also have a couple of other projects in the works, all of which fall into the "nothing official" yet category. But fingers crossed, there will be a YA traditional fantasy published under the name of Jackie Morse in the near future.

ASIM: Why a pen name?

JACKIE: My HELL stuff is really not meant for kids. The YA I wrote is. I'd hate for a twelve year old to walk into a bookstore, looking for the YA book and accidentally picking up *Helle's Belles*. Me, I read *Wifey* when I was twelve, because I loved Judy Blume and didn't realize it was not, not, not a children's book. (The back cover copy, which discussed "chicken on Wednesdays and sex on Saturdays" probably should have tipped me off. I never said I was the brightest bulb out there...)

ASIM: When you're not writing, what do you like to do?

JACKIE: Not writing? Um...sorry? What is this "not writing" of which you speak?

I love reading. (What a stretch!) And having my kids whoop me in a challenging game of CANDYLAND. And my Loving Husband and I enjoy watching THE DAILY SHOW and debating LOST plot points. I also have an unhealthy addiction to checking my email.

ASIM: If Neil Gaiman is one of your influences, can you tell us some others, and the ways they influence you and your writing?

JACKIE: Along with Neil, my influences include...

Christopher Moore. The man is a genius. I love his humor, and how he's utterly unapologetic about discussing whatever he wants to discuss. LAMB is one of my favorite books.

Toni Morrison. Ever since I read BELOVED — specifically, the chapter in which we get the main character's thoughts, including *Beloved* as a two-year-old girl — I've been amazed by how powerful writing can be.

Alan Moore. Have you read THE WATCHMEN? If not, go get it. Right now. I'll wait.

Matt Wagner. I (heart) Hunter Rose.

ASIM: Thanks Jackie!

JACKIE KESSLER is the author of *Hell's Bells*, *The Road to Hell* and *Hotter than Hell* (forthcoming, August 2008), and novella *A Hell of a Time* (April 2008 in *Eternal Lover*, from Kensington Books)

Reviews

Saturn Returns

By Sean Williams

Orbit Books

Reviewed by Dirk Flinthart

Saturn Returns is a fine baak. It's better than fine. In fact, I sat dawn and read it in 48 hours flat, and the only thing that pissed me off was the fact that nowhere on the cover did it say "*Baak One In Yet Another Extended Series Which Sean Will Finish In His Own Gaad Time, Sa Just Sit Dawn, Flinthart!*" Saturn Returns is, in fact, a lovely example of a genre — the sa-called New Space Opera — that speaks directly to the faurteen-year-old SF fan still lurking inside me.

Imre Bergamasc, a sometime mercenary from The Corps, finds himself reconstituted out near the edge of the galaxy by a wandering shipload of collective-identity human-things called the Jinc. It's now the 879th millennium of human history. In less time than it takes to burp the main theme from Star Wars, Imre has discovered that his reconstructed-body memory is a bit out of sorts, that he's been largely dead for something like 150,000 years, and that apparently he — or a number of his alternate selves, since he's part of a kind of collective himself, all made up of identical versions of Imre Bergamasc racing enigmatically about the galaxy — has been very, very naughty in a way which may well have caused the collapse of the galaxy-wide civilisation called The Continuum.

Escaping the Jinc with the help of a Mysterious Silver Spherical Plot Device, Imre zooms off to his old haunts around the Cat's Arse Nebula (interesting name!) to begin his personal tribute to the Blues Brothers: he's puttin' the *band* back together.

Of course, it's not that simple. Some of the old Corps gang don't seem to want to come back. And some of them are pretty seriously imprisoned — particularly Render, a character who speaks only in quotes from Gary Numan lyrics. Not only that, but some of the multiple selves of various members of The Corps don't actually like each other a whole lot. Add in a few mysterious villains and conspiracies, and it gets pretty difficult from time to time to keep track of just who is shooting at whom, and why. But that's fine. That's exactly as it should be. Williams creates a fine sense of confusion in the reader which aptly mirrors the confusion of the main character, not hurting the actual storytelling in any way.

The scope of the novel is vast. Millennia fly by as characters travel at near-lightspeed from one point to the next. Happily for the reader, Williams posits a personal time-perception-alteration technology called "tempo" which allows users to speed or slow their metabolic time. For one of these stellar travellers, a thousand years can pass in

a single afternoon. This is very handy for readers, and even more so for *The Continuum*, because without citizens who can endure for millennia, it's kind of tough to conceive of a galaxy-wide civilisation limited by lightspeed.

In fact, the crux of the story lies in this concept. The Continuum has come crashing down due to some mysterious influence called "The Slow Wave", which may or may not be the fault of one or more Bergamascs. This "Slow Wave" has the effect of suppressing a particular kind of communication channel used by enormous, distributed intelligences called "Forts" who were largely responsible for what order and direction *The Continuum* progressed. Under the Forts, the Galaxy spent a lot of time in vicious, highly ordered warfare. Without the Forts, it has collapsed into vicious, chaotic skirmishing. (Admittedly, it makes me wonder if the vast majority of the galaxy's inhabitants have actually noticed anything.) Imre, who once worked for the Forts, then organized a major war against the Forts only to surrender and apparently go back to work for them, not only discovers that his other-selves may have betrayed and possibly destroyed the Forts, but on the way to doing so, they seem themselves to have actually become one of these Forts in their own right... Which may actually establish some kind of record for 'most convoluted character loyalties in a popular fiction novel'.

Obviously, the main thrust of the plot is all about poor old Imre trying to keep from being killed long enough to figure out what the blazes is going on, and whether or not it's his fault, whatever it is.

Overall, *Saturn Returns* is a very entertaining read. Williams' prose is sharp as ever, with vivid characters, imaginative techno-splashy stuff, and a satisfying dash of dry, sly humour tucked up around the edges. If I had a gripe, it would be this: every now and again as Imre's reconstituted Corps picks up another member, we get long, complex chunks of individual backstory handed to us. To be fair, poor old Imre's gotta catch up on this stuff so it provides a fine opportunity to ensure that the reader is up to speed as well, but just possibly the trope gets a little overused. Certainly, it puts the brakes on an otherwise kickarse plot in a couple of places — but not enough to really bog things down.

Still, now that the scene is properly set, the next book will be able to dispense with such minor trifles, and go charging ahead with the action. Therefore, Sean: get back to the keyboard. NOW!

Eclipse

By Stephenie Meyer

Trade Paperback, Atom, August 2007, 628pp

Reviewed by Tehani Wessely

There are two problems with this baak. The first is I was sa enthralled by it that I devaured it far taa quickly (in ane, albeit lang, sitting in fact!). The second is that naw I have ta wait, and hape, far the next instalment. That's going ta be a taugh wait. Meyer's startelling is campelling. She immerses the reader in her world ta the extent where coming aut of the baak makes ane gasp

far air and struggle to reorient to that which is 'real'.

Eclipse is the third novel in Stephenie Meyer's series chronicling the story of Bella, a teenager who has fallen irrevocably in love with a vampire, Edward. I first met Bella in the second book, *New Moon* (reviewed at <http://www.andromedaspaceways.com/bookreviews.htm>) and was so engrossed by Meyer's storytelling that I found and immediately read the first book *Twilight*. While consuming *Twilight* I realized what it was about the books that I found so compelling. In the beginning, *Twilight* feels like a straight young adult novel, written with bittersweet passion, teenage angst and anguish, and issues that are very real. The fact that Edward and his family are vampires is almost incidental for much of the book. This supernatural element does not define the story, even as it later becomes central to the plot. Rather, what defines the series is the excellence of Meyer's writing.

In *Eclipse*, Stephenie Meyer takes her gift of storytelling to new heights. She experiments outside of Bella's first person perspective, introducing the oral histories tradition to provide juxtaposition to Bella's point of view and to introduce the extending storyline. In the epilogue, a different character takes on the point of view for the first time. I'm not sure this 'voice' was as effective for me (one of my few true complaints about the novel), but it may be Meyer is setting up for the fourth book. If this is the case, I hope the differences in the voice become more apparent, to create a stronger alternate to the Bella voice we've come to know.

This is a minor quibble, detracting only slightly from the overall beauty of Meyer's narrative. Perhaps the greatest strength in her writing is her ability to channel emotions into words on a page. I read most of this book with either a smile on my face or tears in my eyes. I was drawn completely into Bella's struggle to figure out what to do with her life, and the young men who love her. What is delightful about this journey is Bella's growth as a character mirrors that of any adolescent. Bella's battle with the rogue vampires is a physical manifestation of the demons that chase many teens at that point in their lives: leaving home; breaking or stretching familial ties; choosing universities; forming relationships... Bella struggles with all this twofold as the metaphoric journey most of us undertake is made visible by Bella's participation in a real war against vampires.

Bella's choice between life and undead is made harder in this book by the knowledge of what her destiny might be if she took a different path, underscoring the decisions all adolescents make at this time in their lives, decisions that may set the course for the rest of their existence. Bella's decisions are heart wrenching, but it is fascinating to see Meyers delve into the adolescent psyche and draw out these struggles in such a realistic way. The relationship between Bella and Edward is soul encompassing and I'm certain that teens will relate to this complete relationship immersion just as strongly as adults will recall it.

This book deals more deeply with the Quileutes and the werewolf pack spawned by the culture. Meyer treats her werewolves with care, just as she does her vampires, taking elements of the literary traditions associated with these tropes and twisting and extending them in her own unique vision. The character of Jacob once again provides a balance for Bella, but at the same time tears at her emotions, even more than in the second book. Meyer knows that relationships aren't simple or easy, and that sometimes the heart opens to more than one person, despite the depth of love a person may have for another, and she brings this to Bella's relationships beautifully.

In *Eclipse* the peripheral characters are fleshed out more, as the background of other participants in the story is filled in. The complex world Meyer is beginning to build is fascinating and provides a rich tapestry against which Bella's ongoing saga continues. This series is promoted as Young Adult fiction, but appeals to a much wider audience. There is no sex in the novels, although the sensuality and passion is evident, and this is a major departure from other prominent vampire series doing the publishing rounds. There is certainly violence and death and other areas that may be traumatic to read, but they exist contained within the story. For me, the hardest parts to read are those in which Bella struggles against her own overwhelming emotions, not hordes of monsters. And that is what makes the book so wonderful.

2012 Anthology

Edited by Alisa Krasnostein and Ben Payne

Twelfth Planet Press

Reviewed by Tehani Wessely

In a world where water is obviously a scarce commodity, scientists must take enormous risks to assess water caches. In Deborah Biancatti's "Watertight Lies", Gabrielle (Gabe) is on her first excursion underground to test water. Claustrophobics should not read this piece, and its ending will give even experienced spelunkers nightmares. An interesting combination of long descriptive passages with immediacy of action, this story draws you along for the ride.

Unsurprisingly, Martin Livings takes a dark turn with "Skinsongs". Ra'Faella visits the tattoo parlour of the near future to sacrifice for her art. Livings' skill at the darker side of speculative fiction is amazing to read. Without being gruesome or overly explicit, he manages to make the reader cringe with the just-under-the-surface horror of what he writes. Not an easy thing to do.

Elegance of writing is a Flinthart trademark, and in "The Last Word" Dirk Flinthart combines this style with a subtle and finely woven tale of science and big business. The lead character – intelligent and driven by demons that throw him together with his ex-girlfriend, a brilliant scientist with little regard for the realities of her research – is well drawn and easy to identify with, but his final work remains elusive to the reader ... until the last words.

Ben Peek knows how to write a powerful piece, and at the end of reading "David Bowie", I felt a shiver up my spine. I'm not certain the piece entirely fits the 2012 theme, but it is an excellent little vignette that leaves a strong emotion on ending. I found the actual style of the writing a little confusing, but a second re-reading (easy to do with a short piece, and no less powerful than the first) clarified my understanding.

In "Oblivion" Sean McMullen offers the reader a moralistic tale of what is really important in life. The story manages to achieve its aim of containing a message about our near future without being overly preachy, in this quiet piece about a man at the end of his life. The last few paragraphs were perhaps a little heavy handed, but at the same time, the story worked fairly well for me.

"Oh, Russia!" is another quiet story that examines life and death, family and loyalty,

structured in the last grief-filled days of a husband watching his wife die. Simon Brown is a consummate artist with words, and his ability to draw such depths from what is actually a simply story is to be admired.

I'll admit it, I didn't really "get" Lucy Sussex's contribution to this anthology. "Apocalyse Rules" is (I think) supposed to be a hi-jacked Wikipedia entry which references a sinister plot by the "amalgamated" to undermine world order. It's perhaps too heavy, too dense, for me to really enjoy, but I appreciate, as always, the integrity of Sussex's writing style.

I've never met a Tansy Rayner Roberts story I didn't like, and "Fleshy", her (completely out of character SF-nal) story in this anthology is no exception. I have to say it is my favourite of them all, but I'll concede that may be my biases speaking! Tansy takes the very serious and contentious issue of human cloning and with knife sharp insight, makes this story both topical and enjoyable, without ever stepping into preach mode.

The darker side of the near future is explored in Angela Slatter's "Aqua Humana". Again taking a topical subject matter – that of water usage and drought – Slatter posits a truly frightening scenario where the privileged gain water from any possible source. A religious leader tries to find a way to combat the drought, without knowing the terrible process behind the continued source of water, while her estranged boyfriend struggles to fight from a scientific perspective. Excellently paced, with a deeply disturbing scene being portrayed.

If you have ever read a Kaaron Warren story, you will know what I mean when I say she has a gift for writing that is frighteningly elegant. The twining of words to form a tapestry of horror is a talent she has nurtured, and which has here produced "Ghost Jail", a weird and enigmatic tale that sweeps you along with your heart in your mouth until the chilling end.

The theme of drought is clearly one that has captured many of the writers in 2012 and David Conyers is no exception to this. Coupled with war, his piece "Soft Viscosity" is a gritty and complex story that follows a multi-layered plot through blood and torture, to a frightening and all too near future. I wasn't completely enamoured of Conyers' writing style, which felt at times as though the author was trying too hard to be stylish, but for such a long story, this reads well.

I read these stories prior to anthology layout, so I can't add a comment on the overall style or offer concluding thoughts on the construction of the work. What I can say, unequivocally, is that Alisa Krasnostein and Ben Payne have put together a tight collection of finely crafted stories by some of Australia's best and brightest talents in 2008. They have set the bar for all publishers of short fiction this year, with an unusual theme that has been exploited very successfully with the broadest of interpretations by the contributors. This compilation showcases Australian speculative fiction at the very best it can be. Read it. The future is here.

About the authors...

RJ Astruc is an African-Irish writer currently based in Australia. Her speculative fiction has been accepted by *Strange Horizons*, *Abyss & Apex* and *Visible Ink*, amongst others.

Elizabeth Barrette writes fiction, non-fiction, and poetry in the fields of speculative fiction, gender studies, and alternative spirituality. Her poems have recently been published in *Not One of Us*, *Star*Line*, *Strange Horizons*. Her poem "Beach Climbing" was nominated for the Rhysling Award in 2007. She serves as Managing Editor of *PanGaia* magazine (www.pangaia.com); and as Dean of Studies for the Grey School of Wizardry (www.greyschool.com), where she teaches a four-part course in poetry. Her book *Composing Magic* is due out in July. She enjoys suspension-of-disbelief bungee-jumping and spelunking in other people's reality tunnels. Visit her blog at: <http://ysabetwordsmith.livejournal.com>.

Lyn Battersby is happily married to SF author Lee Battersby and together they have five children. She is a Clarion South 2007 graduate and has several publishing credits to her name. Her story, 'The Memory of Breathing', which appeared in issue 17 of *ASIM*, is currently under option to be made into a feature-length movie with the script having just undergone its third draft. You can check out her website at www.battersby.com.au

M P Ericson has lived in Sweden, Trinidad, and Tanzania, but is now settled in the north of England. She holds a PhD in Philosophy, and has worked as a tutor, researcher, and accountant. Her short fiction has appeared in venues such as *Abyss & Apex*, *Dred*, and the *Freehold: Southern Storm* anthology series from Carnifex Press.

Tessa Kum is but a tiny grasshopper. She has published a handful of stories which have appeared in various CSFG and UC publications. Bitter Elsie Mae was written in the midst of the Clarion South 2005 workshop, and is a better story for it. She lives in Melbourne, Australia, and takes her tea with milk, no sugar.

Shana Lear started writing stories when she was only thirteen years old. Fortunately for everyone, this story was written nearly fifteen years and a great deal of experience later. Those early stories will not, we hope, ever again see the light of day. Shana graduated from UC Davis in 2002 with two majors in History and Comparative Literature. After moving to San Diego with her new husband that same year, she found that the real world was quite scary and attempted to mitigate the effects by working at another university, UC San Diego. When not working she enjoys spending time with her husband and two very furry cats, camping, hiking, and of course, thinking up strange and wonderful things to write about.

Nigel Stones assures us that he was created in October 2004 in the basement of the Vision writers group. Born is probably not the right word: he claims he was assembled from a latte, a few smiles, some critique and a balding thirty seven year old IT Manager. Since the auspicious moment of his creation, he has had a handful of short stories published and made considerable progress towards completion of a fantasy novel. Details of his other publications can be found at www.nigelstones.com

Ellie Tupper is married, with one (brilliant, beautiful) daughter. She works for the American Society for Microbiology in Washington, DC, as a Senior Production Editor for ASM Press, managing science book projects from manuscript to printed book. She's been writing since crayon stage, mostly novels — sword & sorcery, suspense, romance -- but recently started on shorts. She has edited *The Other End of the Microscope: the Bacteria Tell Their Own Story: a Fantasy* by Elmer W. Koneman (ASM Press, 2002).

Wade White lives in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada, with his wife and their two active boys. No pets, unless you count the squirrel in the attic and the poor inner city racoons who used to live under the extension in the back. By the time you're reading this, he should be finished his degree. If not, then it's entirely possible he's dead and buried somewhere never to be heard from again. Except hopefully in print. His stories have bribed their way into such fine establishments as Strange Horizons, Ideomancer, Lenox Avenue, and Fortean Bureau. He's also had a short film screenplay produced.

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